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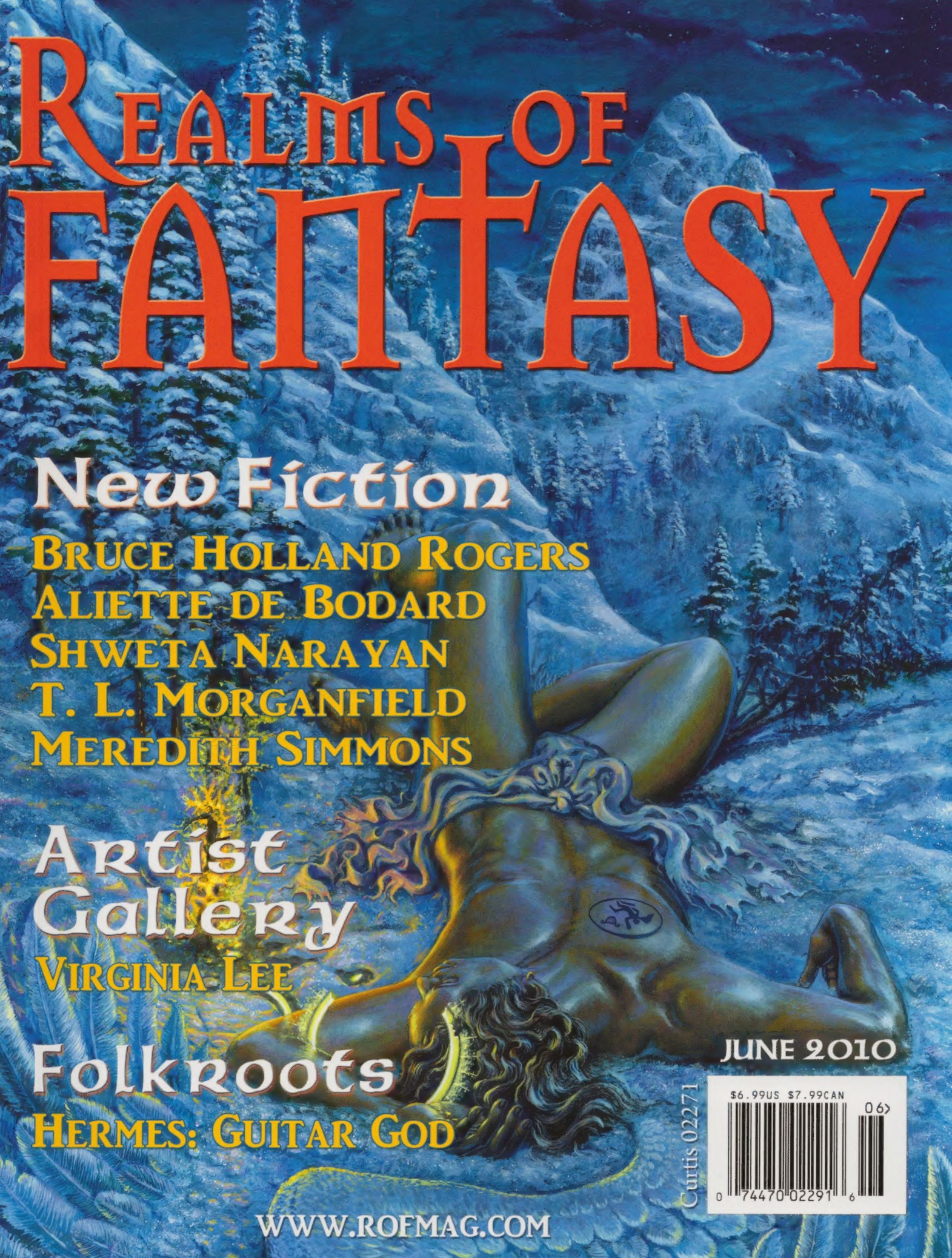

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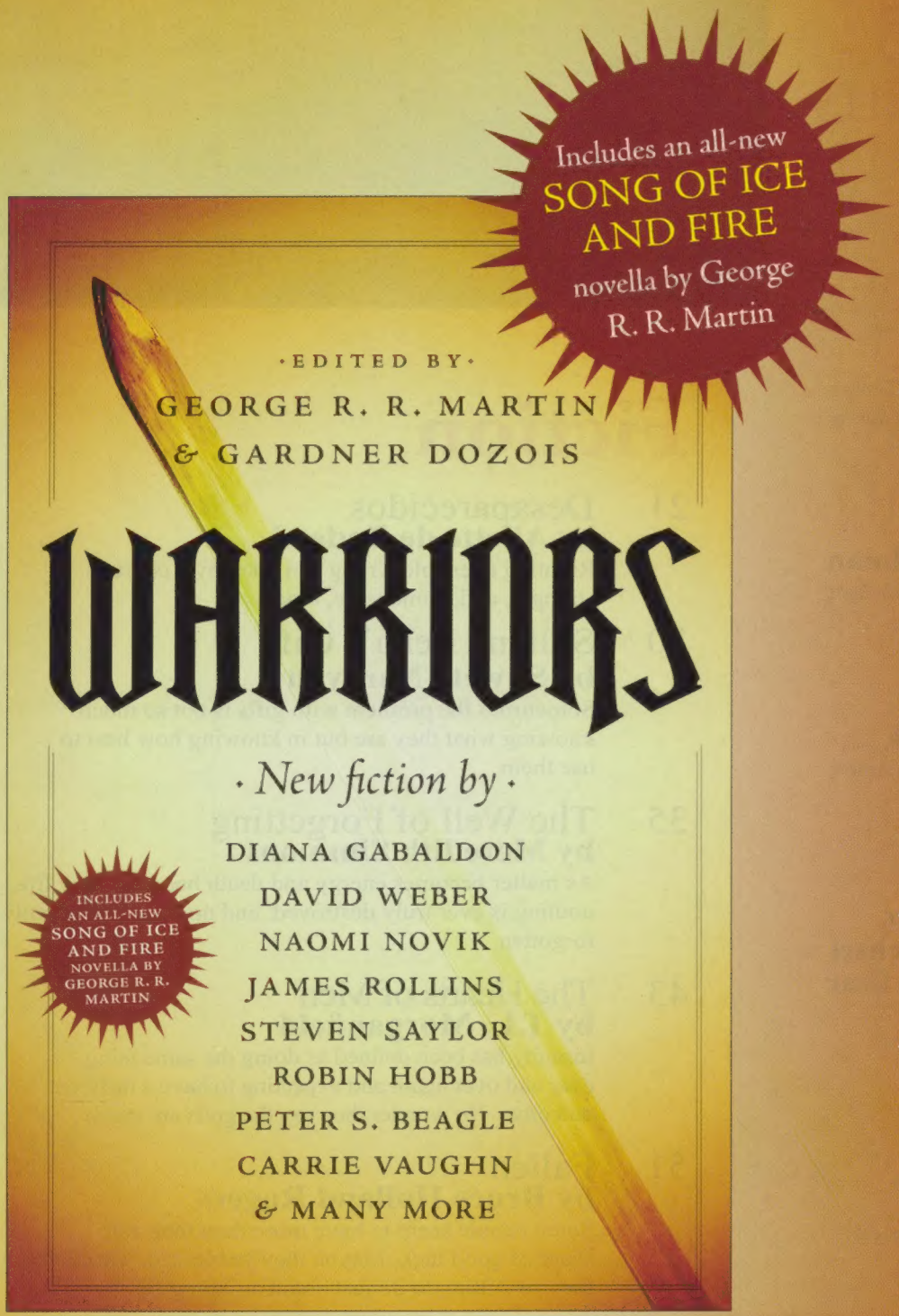

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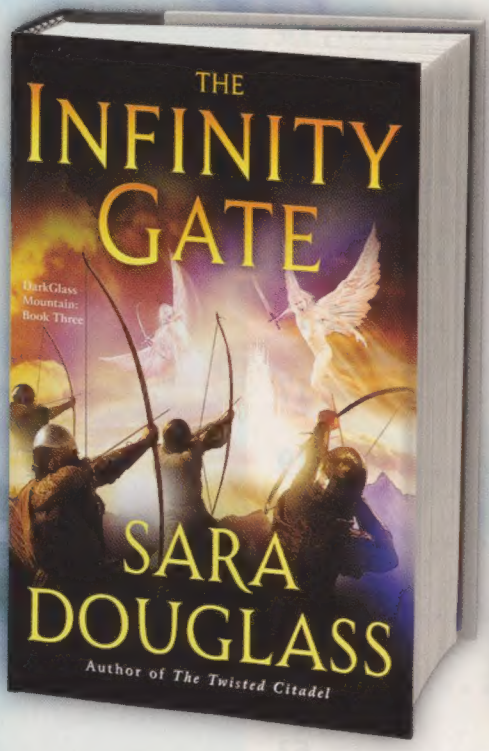

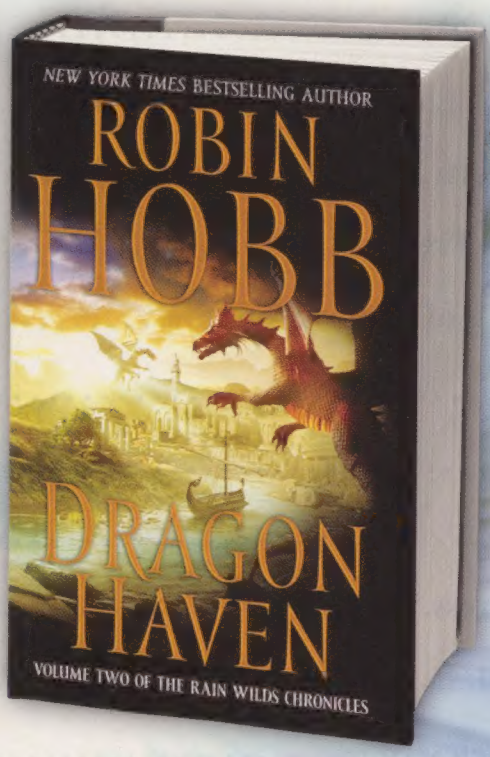

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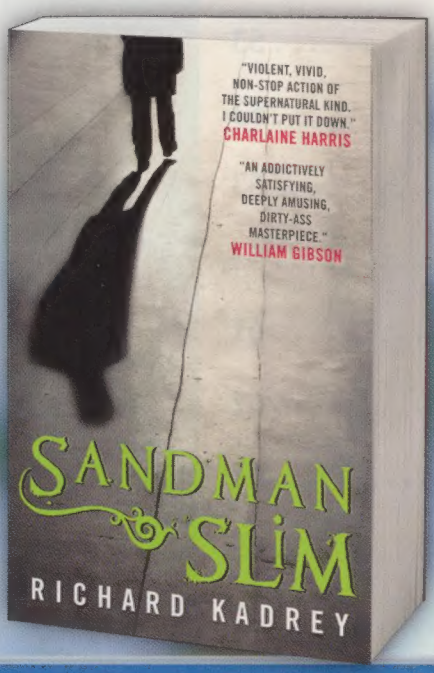
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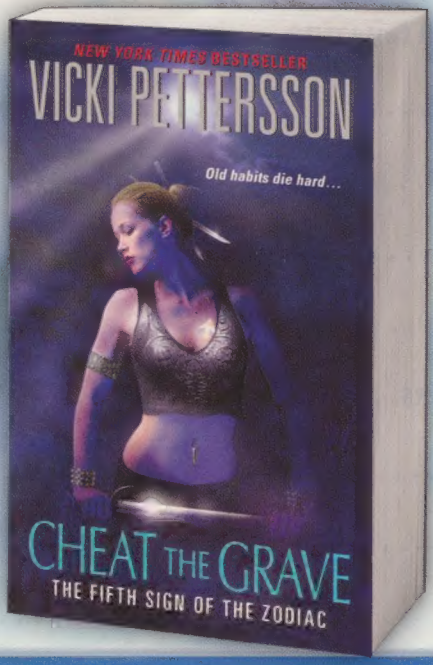

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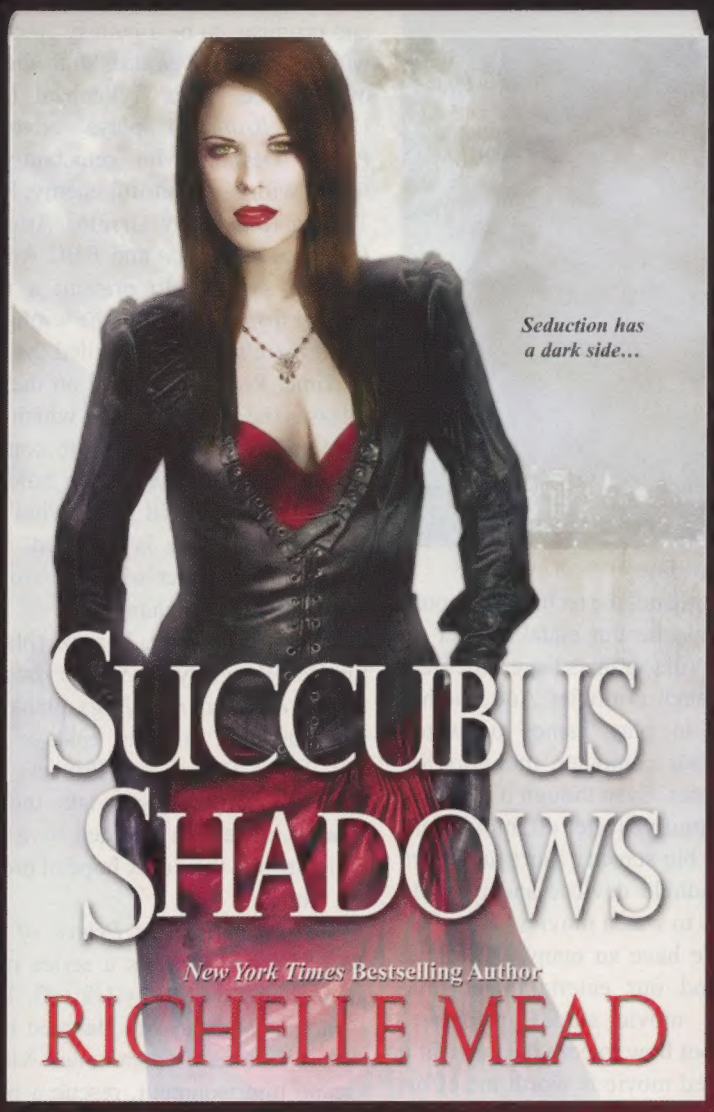

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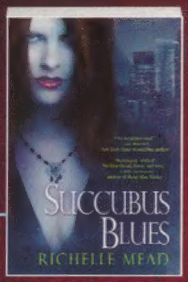

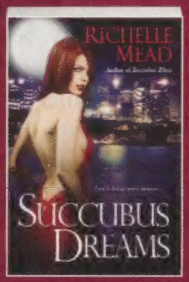

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Resa Nelson

Video Games, Comics, Classics, and Sequels Inspire This Spring's Fantasy Movies

Hollywood always seems to be riding a roller coaster of ups and downs when it comes to figuring out how to convince people to go see movies in theaters. In the early days of film, if you wanted to see a movie, you had one choice: go to the theater. By the 1960s, network television (ABC, CBS, and NBC) and UHF stations aired old movies, sometimes in prime-time slots. Some, like *The Wizard of Oz*, were promoted as special events. The popularity of cable TV grew in the 1970s, and suddenly cable stations like HBO offered a wealth of old movies 24 hours a day. Of course, today the number of cable channels has exploded, and most cable providers offer on-demand movies. Some movies can be viewed online at the same time or even before they're released in theaters, a strategy that may become more commonplace in the future.

But one of the greatest challenges the film industry has ever faced is the double-edged sword of advancing technology. On one hand, the boom of computer-generated images during the past few decades makes it possible to create realistic and exciting fantasy worlds. In addition, with the overwhelming success of *Avatar*, it looks like 3-D movies are finally here to stay.

On the other hand, the technology boom has had a separate but equal impact on other media. Video games have benefited, evolving as much as movies. And whether you choose to play games or watch movies on your computer, monitors are larger and better. Even though it seems to be counter-intuitive (after all, movies are *made* for the big screen), more and more fans use handheld devices and portable DVD players to watch movies.

Because we have so many choices of how to spend our entertainment time and dollars, movie studio executives must figure out how to convince us that a newly released movie is worth the effort to leave the comfort of our homes, fight traffic, battle for a parking spot, and shell out cold, hard cash (or plastic) for tickets and popcorn. One popular strategy is to base a movie on a successful video game with the assumption that, at the very least, people who bought the game will come to the theater to see that beloved world translated to film. Walt Disney Pictures and Jerry Bruckheimer Films are jumping on that bandwagon with their release of *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* on May 28, just before summer blockbuster season begins.

Based on a video game by the same name, the story is set in medieval Persia and promises to be a fantasy epic packed with action, adventure, and the spark of romance. Jake Gyllenhaal (*Donnie Darko*, *Brothers*) plays adventurous Prince Dastan, who reluctantly joins forces with his beautiful enemy, Princess Tamina (played by Gemma Arterton of *Quantum of Solace* and BBC America's *Lost in Austen*), to prevent a magical artifact from falling into the wrong hands. First, there's a weapon called the Dagger of Time. Pressing a jewel on the dagger releases the Sands of Time, which reverse time and make it possible to control the world. But only the person holding the Dagger of Time will know what's going on whenever time is reversed. No one else will remember what the world was like before it was changed.

An evil nobleman, Nizam, (played by Sir Ben Kingsley of *Shutter Island* and *House of Sand and Fog*) plans to use the Sands of Time to enslave people. But Prince Dastan and Princess Tamina embark on a journey to take the dagger to a secret temple guarded by a demon, believing it's their only hope of protecting the world.

The inspiration for *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* is a series of video games, now owned by Ubisoft. The first *Prince of Persia* game debuted in 1989, and it features a commoner who must escape imprisonment, rescue a princess, and who ultimately is named a prince in the game's sequel. There are several *Prince of Persia* games, which means if the movie works, these games could provide plenty of material for sequels.

Prince of Persia could become this spring's breakout film, because the team behind it is a powerhouse. Disney and Bruckheimer joined forces previously to bring the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies to the screen. A mere seven years ago, there was little enthusiasm when Disney announced the release of a new

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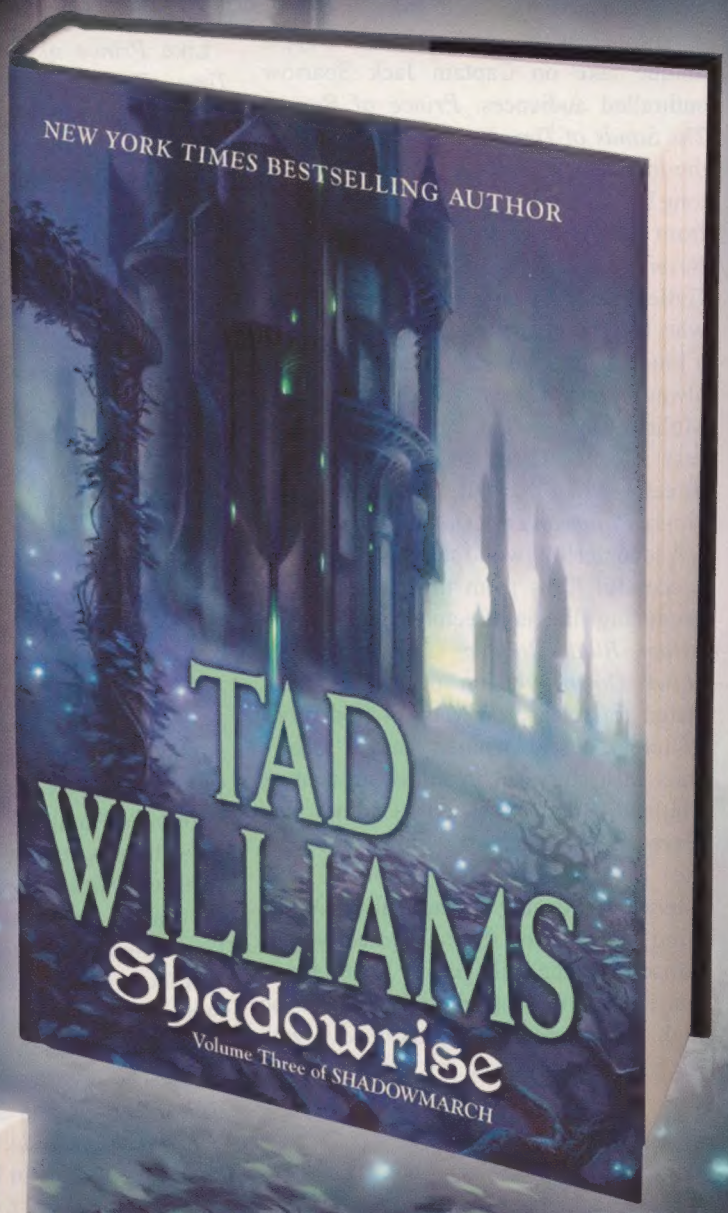

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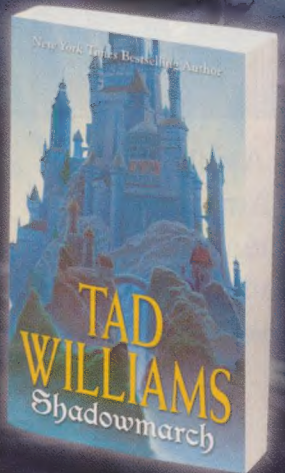

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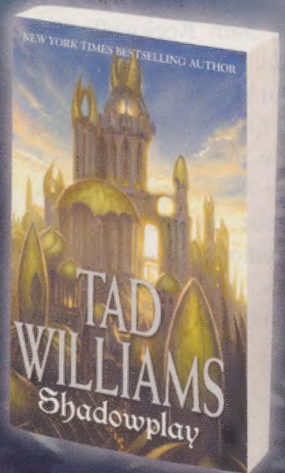

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movie based on one of its popular theme park rides. But word spread like wildfire when the action-packed story, the eye-popping visuals, and Johnny Depp's unique take on Captain Jack Sparrow enthralled audiences. *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* is poised to follow in the footsteps of *Pirates*. Bruckheimer has long been a major player with hits ranging from *American Gigolo* to *Flashdance* to *Beverly Hills Cop* to TV's *CSI* franchise. Gyllenhaal is a young Hollywood veteran who has the chops to shoulder and carry a blockbuster on his shoulders. Kingsley always plays a great villain, and Alfred Molina (*Spider-Man 2*) rounds out the cast nicely. Then, of course, there's director Mike Newell, best known for *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*.

A second Hollywood strategy is reviving successful films from the past. Another promising film is director Ridley Scott's (*Alien*, *Blade Runner*, *Gladiator*, *Black Hawk Down*) version of *Robin Hood*, slated for release on May 14 (Universal Pictures). Oscar winner Russell Crowe stars in a story set in thirteenth-century England. Robin is an expert archer who serves in King Richard's army as it battles the French. However, Robin's main interest is keeping himself alive. When King Richard dies, Robin eventually finds himself in the village of Nottingham, whose sheriff is corrupt and taxes are too high. Robin meets and falls in love with Lady Marian (played by Oscar winner Cate Blanchett of *The Lord of the Rings* movies), even though she's suspicious of him and his motives. Robin decides to win her love and help the town of Nottingham by recruiting a crew of mercenaries to steal from the upper crust and give to those who have no crust at all.

England has been weakened from decades of war, and the new king isn't helping matters. The country is vulnerable to attacks from foreigners as well as the threat of civil war. Robin and his band of men decide to join the effort to save England.

Like *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, Ridley Scott's re-invention of *Robin Hood* might have what it takes to become a summer blockbuster, based on star power and Scott's string of previous hits.

Another Hollywood strategy is to use comic books for inspiration. Following in the footsteps of the 2008 blockbuster, *Iron Man 2* is scheduled to open on May 7 (Paramount Pictures and Universal Pictures). Picking up where the first movie ended, Tony Stark (played by Robert Downey, Jr. of *Sherlock Holmes*) has come clean and revealed himself as the man behind the iron mask. Immediately, the government demands that he turn over the technology. Stark refuses to let anyone else get their grubby paws on his invention, despite the additional pressure from the press and public. At the same time, the mysterious new villain Ivan Vanko, a.k.a. Whiplash (Mickey Rourke of *Sin City* and *The Wrestler*), is busy duplicating Stark's efforts, and builds a suit of his own that gives him extraordinary power. Gwyneth Paltrow (*Shakespeare in Love*) returns as Stark's assistant, Pepper Pots, and Don Cheadle (*Hotel Rwanda*) replaces Terrence Howard as Col. James Rhodes. Other actors new to the cast include Scarlett Johansson (*The Other Boleyn Girl*, *The Prestige*) as the villainess Black Widow and Sam Rockwell (*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*) as business rival Justin Hammer.

The only fantasy film in 3-D this spring is the last movie in the *Shrek* franchise, *Shrek Forever After (The Final Chapter)*, scheduled for release on May 21 from DreamWorks, Paramount Pictures, and Universal Pictures. Nine years ago, *Shrek* took the country by storm with its quick wit, unconventional interpretation of storybook characters, and brilliant animation. Star power helped, giving Eddie Murphy (who voices Donkey) and Mike Meyers (Shrek) their best roles in years. It didn't hurt to base the script on the book by William Steig. But the franchise's secret weapon is walking that fine line in dialog that makes parents want to see these movies as much as their children.

The first movie introduced us to Shrek, the green ogre who wanted nothing more than to be left alone but found himself thrust into a friendship with a donkey and a romance with a princess under a mysterious spell. In the sequel, newlyweds Shrek and Princess Fiona (who is now an ogre) meet her parents (who don't know she's an ogre). A plot to force her to marry Prince Charming introduces the ogre killer Puss in Boots. When Fiona's father King Harold dies in *Shrek the Third*, Shrek declines his right to become king and takes Donkey and Puss in Boots on a mission to find the next rightful ruler, Arthur. Prince Charming rounds up all the fairytale baddies for a

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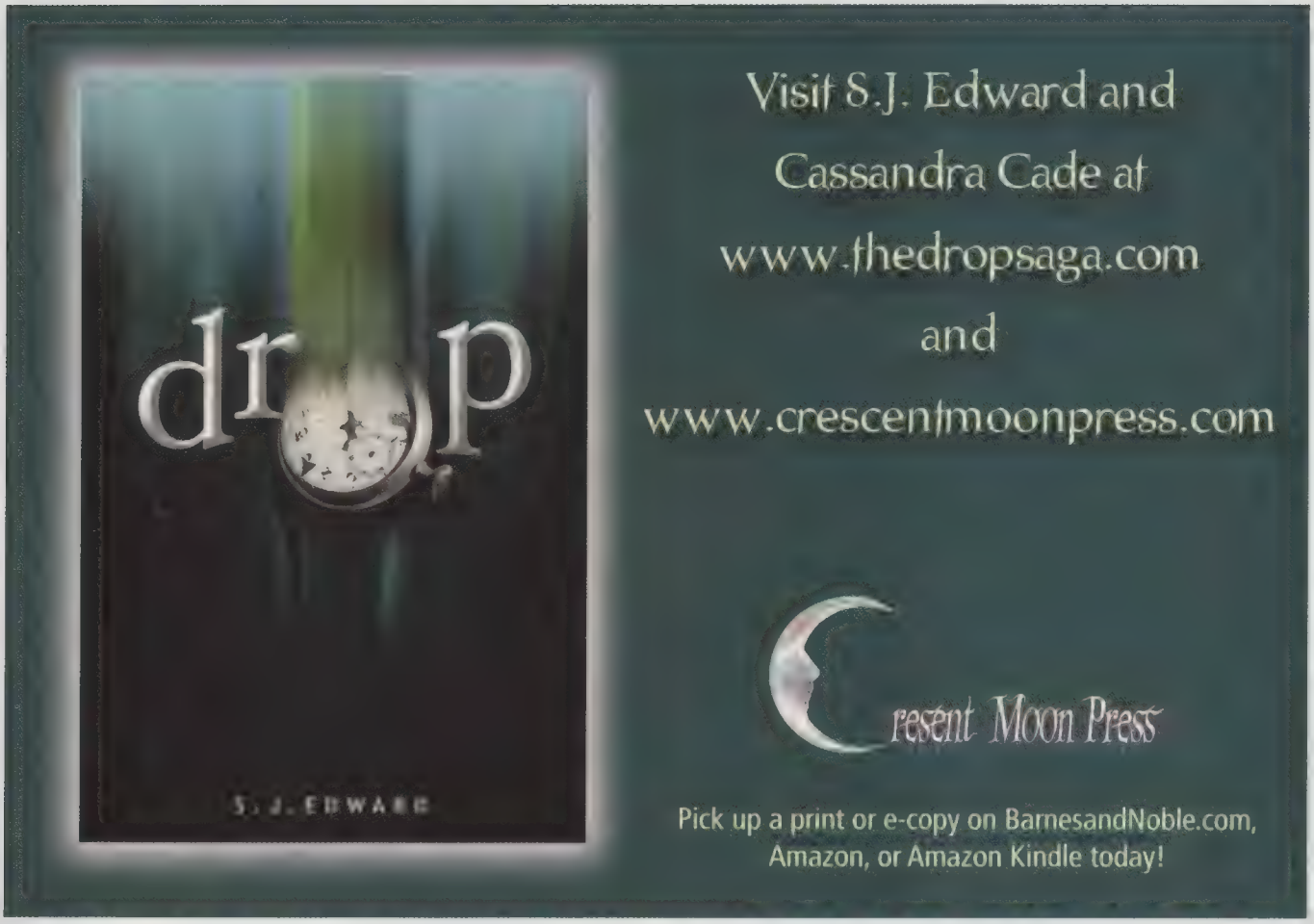

fight, and Shrek comes to terms with impending fatherhood.

In *Shrek Forever After*, Shrek is in the doldrums of domestic life. He misses his days as the ogre who scared the villagers silly. Rumpelstiltskin offers Shrek a deal he can't refuse, and the ogre finds himself in the fairytale equivalent of *It's a Wonderful Life*. In an alternate version of Far Far Away, Shrek finds that Rumpelstiltskin rules the kingdom, ogres are hunted, and he's never even met Fiona. Suddenly appreciating what he's lost, Shrek vows to set the world right so he can return to the wife and family he loves.

For every horror fan who can't get enough of Freddy Krueger, get ready for a "re-imagining" of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* starring Jackie Earle Haley as the disfigured killer. Ironically, Haley has been known primarily for his work as a child actor (*The Bad News Bears* movies, *Breaking Away*, and appearances on TV's *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, *The Partridge Family*, and *The Waltons*). But in more recent years his breakout performance in *Little Children* earned an Oscar nomination as Best Supporting Actor, numerous critics' awards, and paved the way for significant roles in *The Watchmen* (as Rorschach) and *Shutter Island*.

Based on the character created by Wes Craven, Freddy Krueger still wears a fedora and red-and-green-striped sweater, wields a glove with four blades attached to the fingers, and kills people in their dreams, which means they also die in reality. In this version, Freddy hunts a group of teens in their dreams. They can protect each other when they're awake, but once they're asleep, all bets are off.

The first *Nightmare on Elm Street* was released in 1984. Considering it's been twenty-six years since the first *Nightmare* saw the light of day, it's easy to understand the decision to breathe new life into what was once a highly successful franchise. From 1984 to 1991, a new *Nightmare* was released once each year or every other year. In 1988, Freddy crossed over to TV with a series called *Freddy's Nightmares*. The franchise included a total of eight movies (the last was 2003's *Freddy vs. Jason*), the TV series, and a video game. Craven clearly had tapped some kind of primal fear that tantalized audiences and made them clamor for more.

And that leads to the question: How likely it is that the new *Nightmare* can survive without Craven's leadership? If this re-imagining doesn't kick-start a new series, it might be safe to say that Freddy is finally dead. ☙

Resa Nelson has been the TV/Movie columnist for *Realms of Fantasy* magazine since 1999. She is a SFWA member and a Clarion graduate. Her first novel, *The Dragonslayer's Sword* (published by Mundania Press), was a Finalist for the 2009 EPPIE Award for Best Fantasy Novel and is the first novel in her Dragonslayer series. Her next novel is a standalone novel: *Our Lady of the Absolute* is scheduled for publication in mid-2010. Nelson's short fiction has been published in *Science Fiction Age*, *Fantasy*, *MZB's Sword and Sorceress XXIII*, and other magazines and anthologies. Visit her website and blog at: www.resanelson.com.

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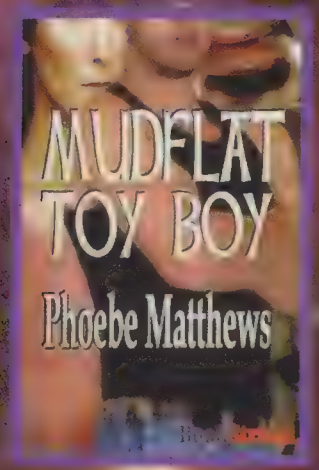

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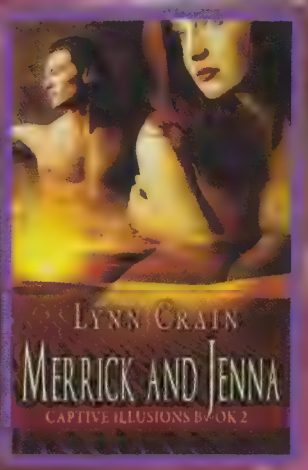

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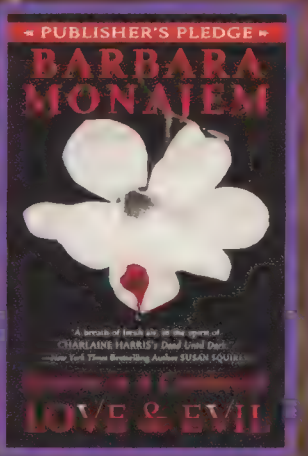

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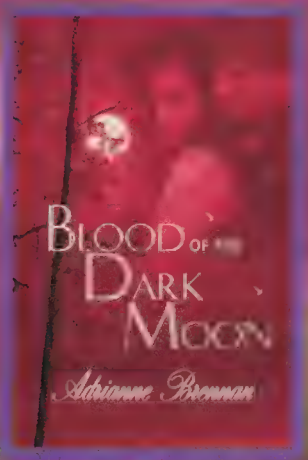

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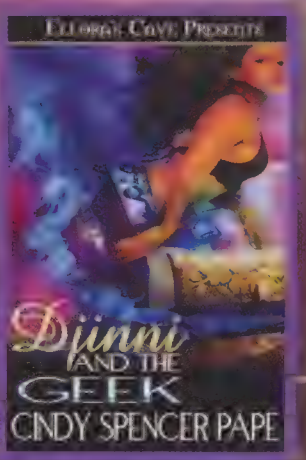

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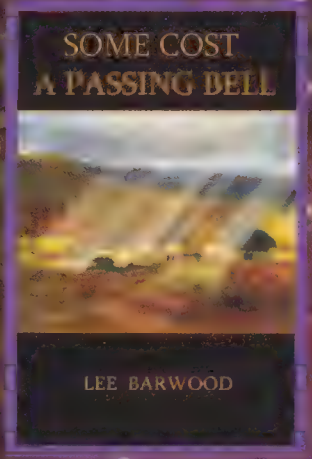

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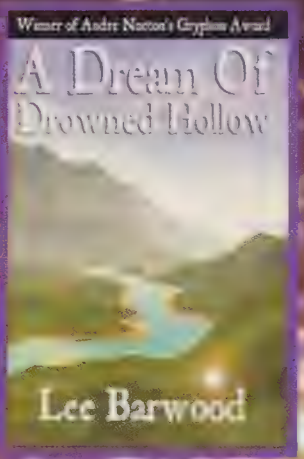

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Hermes: Magician, Messenger, and Guitar God

by H. Talat Halman, PhD

He invented the guitar on the day he was born. Baby Hermes, not even a day old, stumbled upon a tortoise and told her he would make her sing. He said he would make her a symbol by which he would be recognized as a god. Then he killed her to make the body of that *kithara,* the first guitar. Cutting stalks of reeds, he made the neck and crossbow; he backed the soundboard with an ox skin "and stretched seven harmonious strings of sheep gut to it." He picked up his plectrum and "it resounded awesomely" (*Homeric Hymns* ll. 25-64). He sang beautifully and tauntingly a song about his own birth. As Percy Shelley paraphrased his song:

> He sung how Jove and May of the bright sandal
> Dallied in love not quite legitimate;
> And his own birth, still scoffing at the scandal.
> And naming his own name did celebrate (qu. in Brown, 77).

Hermes is the guitar avatar. No one before had created a musical instrument that let a person simultaneously sing and accompany themselves with melody and harmony (Sardello, 122). What an instrument! People even play "air guitar." A line runs straight from Hermes and his *kithara* to Harrison, and Hendrix, to Clapton and Clay.

Hermes is more than musician, however: "Born at dawn, he was playing the *kithara* by mid-day. In the evening, he stole Apollo's herd of fifty cattle. Also the patron god of thieves, he walked Apollo's cattle backwards and wore special reverse sandals to puzzle his trackers" (*Homeric Hymns*, v. 17). After his theft of the cattle Hermes created a fire and sacrificed two of Apollo's cows, setting aside twelve portions of meat, and stretched the skins of two of the cattle on jagged rocks for all to see. Since there were only eleven Olympian gods at that time, he dedicated the twelfth portion to himself, thereby contriving to make himself a god. Then he slipped through the keyhole of his house and took a nap.

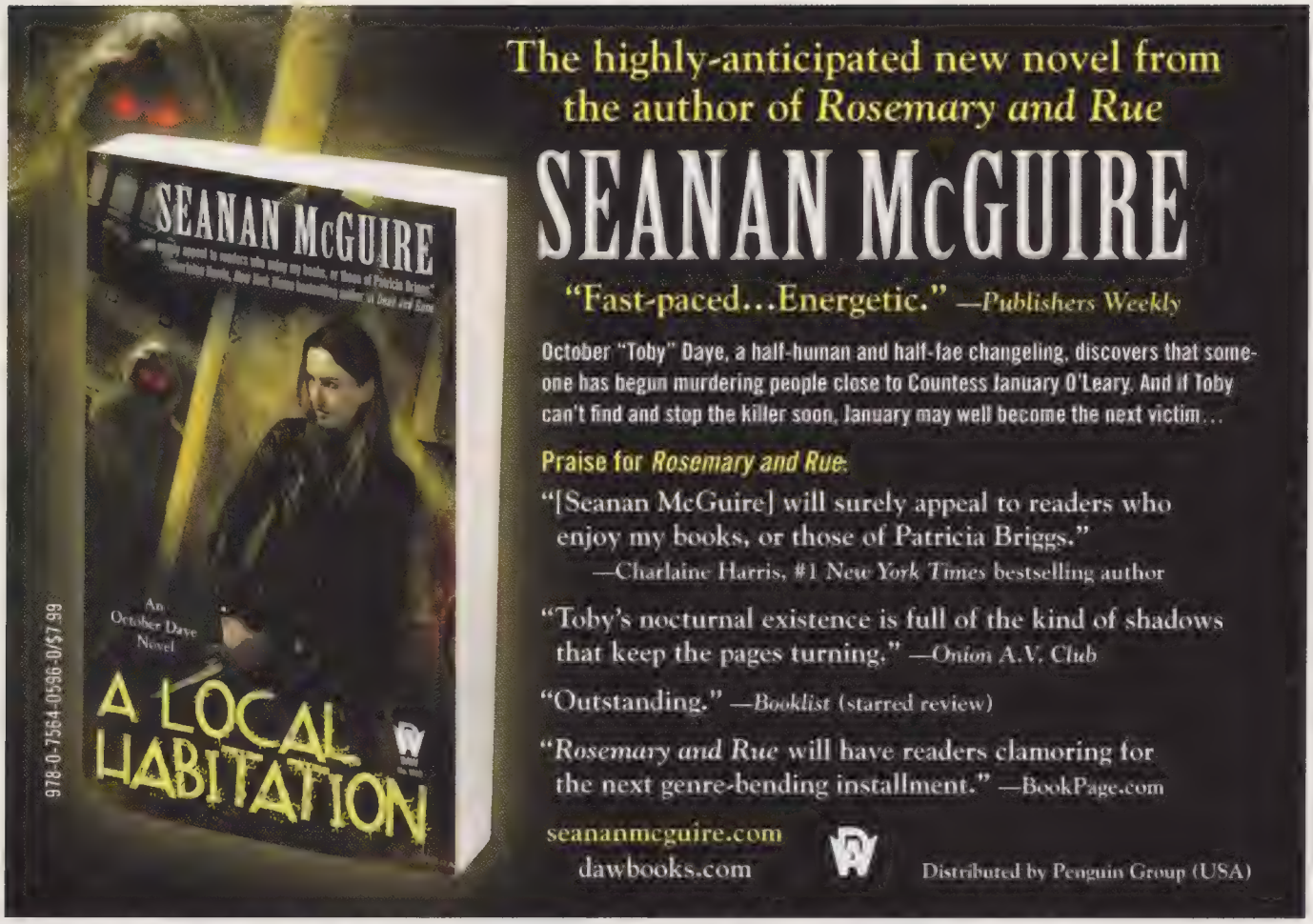
Hermes, to Westerners, is particularly fascinating because he is simultaneously transgressive and creative, thumbing his nose at his fellow gods even as his divine skill increases. The musical outlaw becomes an archetype that encompasses Taliesin, Robin Hood, and the folk heroes of the American West, all of whom are progenitors of the rock star. For a modern Hermes, we need look no further than the Rogue's Gallery that makes up Bruce Springsteen's guitar anthem narrators: Outlaw Pete, who was

> …born a little baby on the Appalachian trail.
> At six months old he's done three months in jail.
> He robbed a bank in his diapers and his little bare baby feet
> All he said: "Hey folks, my name is Outlaw Pete."

The wandering, guitar-toting heroes of "Thunder Road" and "Born to Run," the thieves and tricksters of "Mr. State Trooper," "Stolen Car," and "Pink Cadillac" are all sons of Hermes. But what Springsteen—and truly, all the blues and rock guitarists through the ages—has tried to express is the Hermetic tradition of ecstatic and subversive self-transformation: the union of the earthly (tortoiseshells and sheep guts) with the divine (the music of the spheres), the child with the prodigy, the man with the god.

Two threads of Hermes' being twist together. First is the mercurial messenger of the Greek Gods, bearer of a staff, a messenger's wand, called the *kerykeion* and the *caduceus,* who invented the guitar and invented fire (Prometheus did not invent, but only *stole* fire). Second is the great Alchemical Magus, the archetype of the magician, the late Egyptian figure Hermes Trismegistus, the thrice Great. This is the Hermes represented on the "Magician" card in the Tarot deck. For example, on "The Magician" (Arcana I) card in the Rider-Waite deck, Hermes indicates with his hands the Hermetic axiom, "As above, so below." Spread before him on the table are the symbols of the four elements: pentacles (earth), cup (water), sword (air), and staff (fire) over which he stands. As Hermes teaches in the Hermetic dialogue *Asclepius:* "The elements by which the whole of matter has been formed, then, are four: fire, water, earth, air. One matter, one soul, and one god." Hermes elaborates, "…[C]onsciousness is…the fifth part, granted to humanity…from the aether" (Copenhaver 68, 70). The Magician in the Tarot points his wand in his right hand toward trellised flowers above, that reflect the flowers he points to with his left hand below. The flowers above are roses; below, both roses and lilies, the flowers of love in the Song of Songs of Solomon. His belt is the snake called Ouroboros, the symbol of immortal wisdom brought together in a complete circle. Above his head is the infinity symbol intimating the divine mind that guides his mercurial and magical thought.

The ancient Greek Hermes was a cunning trickster. When Apollo caught Hermes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after his cattle raid and brought him to their mutual father, Zeus, for justice, Hermes stated, "I was only born yesterday," and when Apollo grasped him, since he was only a babe, he did what babies will do: gave him "a gift from his belly." Zeus was amused at his youngest son's cunning.

In compensation, Hermes gave Apollo his new invention, the guitar. Charmed by Hermes' *kithara*, Apollo felt it worth the fifty cattle and he received it gladly as a gift from Hermes. In turn Apollo also gave Hermes his signature golden wand, the *caduceus*. As Norman O. Brown asserts, they each initiated each other into their respective arts. Yet Hermes remains the master teacher as he addresses Apollo:

You question me very carefully, Far-shooter [Apollo], but I do not at all begrudge you entering into my art.

You will know this skill today. I want to be conciliatory to you...

But since your heart is so eager to play the lyre [*kithara*],

Sing and play the lyre and get ready for merriment,

As you receive it from me. But you, friend, grant me glory...

And I will give you this lyre, glorious son of Zeus.

But I in turn will graze the cattle of the fields in pastures

(*Homeric Hymns*, ll. 464-466; 475-477; 490-491).

In the exchange of *kithara* for *caduceus*, the Egyptians reasoned, Hermes becomes the inventor of the art of music (Hall, 81). Today's rock gods now express the dual archetypes of Hermes and Apollo—they just took a while in the course of history to show up. As Hermes had his *kithara*, King David had his *kinnon* and Shiva his *vina*, the ancestor of the sitar.

After World War I, Hermes' other symbol, the *caduceus*, was adopted as the symbol of medicine and healing. This seems appropriate since for humane purposes doctors must be allowed to cross borders, and it is Hermes who is the god of travel across boundaries. In addition to his *caduceus* wand, Hermes, especially in his Roman form of Mercury, also wears a feathered helmet (the *petastis*) and winged ankles (*talaria*). Under that helmet is a swift schemer whose feet keep pace with his mercurial mind.

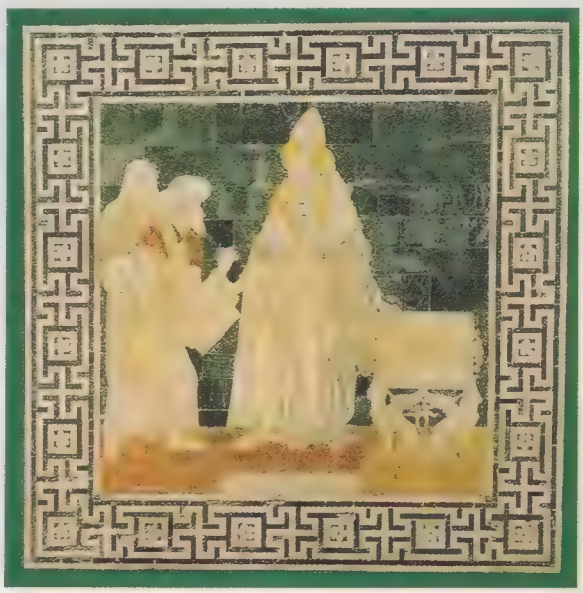
Hermes, the great boundary crosser, sometimes rescued people, as he rescued Persephone from the death-realm of Hades. He knew how to negotiate the release of bound souls. In such cases Hermes was known as the *psychopomp*, the one who guides souls to and from Hades, the realm

of death. For this reason the Greeks placed images of Hermes in their graves to aid the soul of the deceased. In Hermes lay the key to the mysteries of death.

The ancient Greeks would say "*hermaion*" when a sudden silence descended among a group, to honor Hermes' presence and to invoke his power of language to revive the conversation. They also said "*hermaion*" when they left fruit by the roadside for travelers. Hermes statues were placed at crossroads, boundaries, and in front of houses. The phallic statues called *herma*, originally stone heaps (the etymological root of Hermes' name) and later figurative pillars, were sacred apotropaic guardians (i.e., they warded off evil). The herm, a column rising up from a square pedestal on the earth, often showed only Hermes' penis and his head. Plotinus took this to mean that the herm symbolizes the transmission and transmutation of the earth's underworld energy into creativity and the flowering of the spirit. From the earth, Hermes (a symbol of all human beings) generates both powerful energy and the wisdom to use it.

Hermes is the god of the crossroads, the messenger on the roads. Did blues guitarist Robert Johnson know this as he sang his "Cross Road Blues"? A legend arose that at the crossroads Robert Johnson met the devil and sold his soul, which explained his unique guitar style and prodigious gift of music. Either way, Hermes is the god of those who take to the road, seeking enlightenment:

I went down to the crossroads,
fell down on my knee.
I went down to the crossroads,
fell down on my knee.
Asked the Lord above for mercy,
"Save me if you please."



In the Hellenistic period, Alexandrian Greeks encountered the Egyptian god Thoth, patron of writing, magic, music, medicine, astronomy, and geometry, and recognized Hermes in him. At the temple of Thoth, the two gods became one and were worshipped as one in the Upper Egyptian city of Hermopolis (Ashmunein). Thus arose the even more dynamic figure of Hermes Trismegistus the thrice-wise. In the *Corpus Hermetica*—the collected lore and sacred texts of Hermetic teachings—Hermes becomes a dynasty: Thoth is counted as the first Hermes, grandfather of the second Hermes, Hermes Trismegistus, the son of Agathodaimon, the "good spirit." Hermes' son, Tat, is the third Hermes and the pupil of the second Hermes (Trismegistus). In addition to the *Corpus Hermetica,* Egypt's adoration of Hermes brings us to the *Emerald Tablet*.

The *Emerald Tablet* conveys the secret that illuminates all experience, describing a primordial light that permeates all dimensions and corners of the universe and of the human mind. That light transforms all experience and gives it meaning, and that light is accessed through Hermes, often figured as the "key" to enlightenment—in the *Homeric Hymn* to Hermes, the god, rather than opening a door, enters through the keyhole. Hermes *is* himself the key. The *Emerald Tablet* offers a meditation on Hermetic enlightenment:

1. In truth and without doubt, whatever is below is like that which is above to accomplish the miracles of one thing.

2. Just as all things proceed from One alone by meditation on One alone, so also are they borne by one thing by adaptation.

3. Its father is the sun and its mother the moon. The wind has borne it in its body. Its nurse is the earth.

4. It is the father of every miraculous work in the whole world.

5. Its power is perfect if converted into earth.

6. Separate the earth from the fire and the subtle from the gross, softly with great prudence.

7. It rises from the earth to heaven and comes down again from heaven to earth and thus acquires the power of the realities above, and the realities below. In this way you will acquire the glory of the whole world, and all darkness will leave you.

8. This is the power of all powers, for it conquers everything subtle and penetrates everything solid.

9. Thus the little world (*microcosmos*) is created according to the prototype of the great world (*macrocosmos*).

10. From this and in this way, marvelous applications are made.

11. For this reason I am called Hermes Trismegistus, for I possess the three parts of the wisdom of the whole world.

12. Perfect is what I have said of the work of the sun (Burckhardt, 196-7).

The *Emerald Tablet* says all things proceed from "meditation on One alone." Verses three, seven, and twelve make it absolutely clear that the "one thing" on which Hermes advocates meditation is universal, eternal, and all-pervasive light. It is the original light that illuminates, surrounds, and permeates the beauty of life. As Hermes explains to his son Tat: "And god, who is energy and power, surrounds everything, and permeates everything, and understanding of god is nothing difficult, my child" (Copenhaver, *Corpus Hermeticum* XII:20). The knowledge in the *Emerald Tablet,* green and alive, teaches the process of creating and transforming life with mind, heart, love, and light. Hermes knows the three parts of wisdom, the wisdom of each aspect of life: the spirit, soul, and body. Some say he was called "thrice-great" for having mastered the three arts of astrology, alchemy, and magic; many others say this means he was the greatest King, Philosopher, and Priest. Either way, Hermes teaches the forces of attraction. As Hermes explains to Tat in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, God created humanity because God wanted to be able to share mutual love (Copenhaver I:12, p. 72). This love, which spreads like light, is the real meaning of the *Emerald Tablet*. This is ultimately the great secret: the law of mutual attraction between God and humankind. Love travels at the speed of light. As Meher Baba writes: "Love is essentially communicative; those who do not have it catch it from those who do" (vol. 1, 24).

In the fourth book of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Hermes teaches Tat that God has given a Grail, or "Krater," filled with divine gnosis, that people may drink of this knowledge:

He [god] filled a great mixing bowl with it [mind] and sent it below, appointing a herald whom he commanded to make the following proclamation to human hearts: "Immerse

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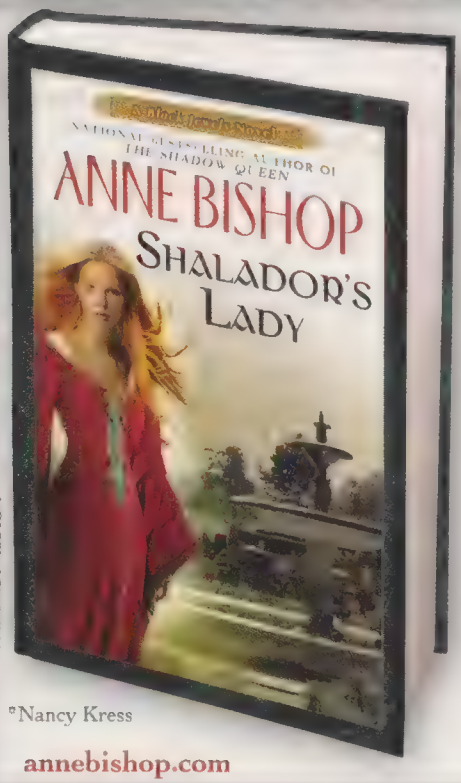

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yourself in the mixing bowl if your heart has the strength if it believes you will rise up again to the one who has sent the mixing bowl below, if it recognizes the purpose of your coming to be." All those who heeded the proclamation and immersed themselves in mind participated in knowledge and became perfect people because they received mind (Copenhaver IV:4).

Henry and Renée Kahane have suggested that this Grail motif was transposed onto the Arthurian Perceval legend along with the figure of the hermit Trevizrent (triple-science). Perhaps the Holy Grail began with this transmission from the hermetic tradition.

To explain Hermes' teaching further, the third century Magus Apollonius of Tyana narrated in the *Sirr al-Khaliqah* that in his hometown stood a statue of Hermes, and below which was written: "The secret lies beneath my feet. He who wishes to know the secret of creation and the production of nature should look under my feet." Digging in the earth, Apollonius was led into a dark cavern to a golden throne at the end of the cave on which sat Hermes who gave him the *Emerald Tablet* and the secret of the water of eternal life. And Hermes tells Apollonius to protect his light in a clear vessel. The inner light of love is at once powerful, but also, delicate and needs a protective framework, a vessel to protect it from fierce winds (Rosenthal, 246, and Faivre, 93-4).

The medieval mages, also called alchemists, applied the Hermetic teachings to their obsessive search for the secret of uniting light and matter in one pure substance. The secret stone—the philosopher's stone—was believed to transmute base metals into gold and ordinary people into illuminated beings. Poet Edward Benlowes wrote in his *Theophilia* of the philosopher's stone: "Convert dull lead to active Gold by LOVE-CHYMIE....Turn sense to Spirit, Nature's changed alone/ By Grace; that is the *Chymick-stone*" (qu. in Abraham, 145). The stone is everywhere, both treasured and trivialized. What else is as pervasive as light and love? This is why Apollonius had to dig under Hermes' feet.

A Sufi story tells of a dervish who came to the Sultan's palace to dig every day in the royal garbage pit. Every day the Sultan would see the poor dervish digging in his garbage and the dervish would look up at the Sultan. So one day the Sultan took pity on him and sent a servant to give the dervish a bag of gold. The next day, the dervish came back again to rummage in the garbage. So the Sultan had the dervish brought before him and asked, "Wasn't the gift of gold enough?" The dervish replied, "Yes, I thank you for the gift, but what I really come for every day is to see your face at the window. Now that you have brought me here, my true wish has been fulfilled." So, like Apollonius and that dervish, we have to dig right where we stand, to stir up the garbage in our shadow, to make peace with our demons. Shamans and Qabbalists know the secret of descending into the self via meditation in order to rise up before God and the angels. Thus while describing an ascension, Qabbalists wrote of the work of the chariot (*ma'aseh merkavot*) as a descent. One sense in which they were descending, they would huddle over their knees to do breathing exercises to reach trance states which would raise them up.

Hermes Trismegistus is the first Magus, the great magician, the alchemist, the father of alchemy and philosophy. The Manicheans and many Sufis recognize Hermes as the founder of their lineage of knowledge. To the Manicheans, Hermes was one of the five major prophets before their founding Prophet Mani (d. 269). Muslims have recognized

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Hermes as a Prophet under the names Idris (Qur'an 19:57 and 21:85-86) and *Hirmis al-Muthalath bi'l-Hikma* (Hermes thrice wise in wisdom). As narrated by his wife Aisha, the Prophet Muhammad, commenting on the first received verses of the Qur'an (96.1-4), identifies Idris as the first person to write with a pen (Bukhari, 6.60.180). In Egypt, across the Red Sea from Mecca and Medina, Thoth held this exact distinction. Idris is popularly depicted as the first to sew clothing and is revered by tailors as the patron of their guild. Popular tales of the prophets narrate that Idris achieved immortality when he tricked the angel of death into letting him step into paradise for just a moment. When the angel asked him to come out, Idris slyly replied that once one has entered paradise, one cannot return (Thackston, 87-91). This sounds like Hermes the trickster.

In the Islamic tradition, the three Hermeses were carefully delineated. The first Hermes was the great grandson of Adam—or more precisely Enoch (i.e. Idris)—who wrote books of knowledge of celestial and terrestrial things. He built the pyramids, was the first patron of science and math, and was the first to sew clothes. The second Hermes was the Babylonian Hermes who lived in Babylon after the flood and taught science, philosophy, and math. Among his students was Pythagoras. The third Hermes, the Egyptian, was a physician and philosopher who wrote books on medicine and the alchemical arts (Holmyard, 160). In Arabic one refers to the three pyramids at Giza as "the Hermeses": *al-ahram*, just like the name of Cairo's daily newspaper.

So the archetype of Hermes identifies a master who is also a trickster or a transformative teacher. Obi Wan Kenobi with his wry humor and the green, teasing Yoda remind us of Hermes. The great master who initiates and empowers a student like Luke Skywalker is following in the footsteps of Hermes Trismegistus—and their creator, George Lucas, has made no secret of his debts to mythic scholar Joseph Campbell's investigations into such archetypes.

By the twelfth century, the Sufi sage Yahya Suhrawardi (d. 1191) claimed a lineage of transmission he called the "ancient wisdom" (*al-hikmat al-'atiqa*) that began with Hermes Trismegistus and continued through Zarathustra, Pythagoras, Empedocles, Plato, Plotinus, and a number of Sufi mystics. In the Renaissance, Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and other scholars collected the fragmented Hermetic writings into the *Corpus Hermeticum*, creating a great narrative of enlightenment and power in which Hermes Trismegistus recounts his initiation by an apparitional being named Poimandres, "the mind of sovereignty." As Brian Copenhaver suggests, the word is a Coptic rendering of the phrase "knowledge of [the Egyptian Sun god] Ra" (95). The sun in the Hermetic context symbolizes the highest, most sublime light of the universe, the symbol of the cosmos and humankind. "…[T]he sun is an image of the cosmos. The human is an image of the sun" (XI:15) Poimandres tenderly tells Hermes, "I know what you want, and I am with you everywhere… Keep in mind everything you wish to learn and I will teach you" (I:2-3). Trismegistus recounts: "Saying this, he changed his appearance, and in an instant everything was immediately opened to me. I saw an endless vision in which everything became light—clear and joyful—and in seeing this vision I came to love it" (I:4-5).

Then followed a darkness from which water appeared, a holy word mounted on the water, and then arose fire, air, and earth. Poimandres asks Trismegistus if he understands the vision and explains, "I am the light you saw, mind, your god, who existed before the watery nature that appeared out of darkness. The lightgiving word who comes from mind is the son of god… Understand the light then, and recognize it." Then, as many initiators do, Poimandres gazed so intently into his face that Hermes trembled for a long time: "But when he raised his head, I saw in my mind, the light of powers beyond number and a boundless cosmos that had come to be" (I:7).

Thus, a significant part of the *Hermetica* is based on the idea that to know God, you must create and know yourself as like God: "Thus unless you make yourself equal to god, you cannot understand god; like is understood by like" (XI:20). Affinity and attraction are hermetic keys to the Renaissance concept of the *prisca theologia* (the "original theology") attributed to Hermes Trismegistus (Faivre, 97-8).

Scholar Ernest Lee Tuveson sees in the *Corpus Hermetica* an early version of Anglo-Saxon Romanticism, compares the *Hermetica*'s conceptions of nature as reflections of the divine with the poetry of William Wordsworth and Walt Whitman, and identifies these poets as "avatars of the thrice great Hermes." Wordsworth, seeking intimations of immortality, engages in a hermetic act. Whitman is hermetic in every sense of the word: tricksterish, protean, Gnostic, a singer of the open road. Whitman writes of Hermes:

> I see Hermes, unsuspected,
> dying, well-beloved,
> saying to the people, Do not

weep for me,
this is not my true country, I have lived'
banished from my true country, I now go
back there, I return to the celestial sphere
where every one goes in his turn ("Song of Salutation" l. 120).

Hermes stands on the line dividing human and divine. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow expressed this in his poem "Hermes Trismegistus":

Was he one, or many merging
Name and fame in one,
Like a stream, to which, converging,
Many streamlets run?

Who shall call his dreams fallacious?
Who has searched or sought
All the unexplored and spacious
Universe of thought?
Who in his own skill confiding,
Shall with rule and line
Mark the border-land dividing
Human and divine?
Trismegistus! Three times greatest!
How thy name sublime
Has descended to this latest
Progeny of time! (qu. in Hauck, 31)

Hermes is such a "progeny of time" because his archetype has inspired so many masters and artists. Think of Merlyn, Paracelsus, St. Germain, Cagliostro, Anton Mesmer, Walt Whitman, Madame Blavatsky, Aleister Crowley, Obi Wan Kenobi, Gandalf, Gurdjieff, and many others. All these figures exemplify the Magus, one of whose original forms was Hermes Trismegistus. In our time, the Hermetic role falls to the mercurial troubadours of social justice, of ecstatic musical transcendence, and of comic subversion: Bob Dylan, Pete Townshend, Jimmy Page, and banjo aficionado and "Ramblin' Man" Steve Martin.

Human beings live in realms of symbolic action. The discipline of interpreting symbols is named after Hermes: hermeneutics. The world of wonder of stories and meanings owes much to Hermes, the transmitter of knowledge, the master—and magician—of symbolic action, music, and initiatory experience. When our imaginations take to the highway, seeking the elusive treasures of transformation, light, and love, we follow in the restless footsteps of Hermes. ☙

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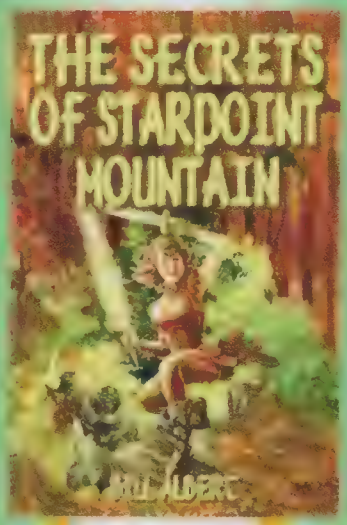

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DESAPARECIDOS

by Aliette de Bodard
Illustration by Rob Alexander

Righting a terrible wrong can take love, courage, strength, and, sometimes, blood.

Caldera de los Angeles (Crater of the Angels)

About 15 km (10 miles) from downtown El Águila. Count on about three hours of a fairly taxing climb to reach the top, but the inside of the caldera—with its magnificent lake and forest—is well worth the exertion.

Legend has it that the crater marks one of the numerous places where the rebellious angels fell down from Heaven—hence its name.

From *A Traveler's Guide to the Acamba Valley*

Patricia reached the bottom of the caldera, and stood by the lake's edge, watching the blue-green water ripple in the wind. And now what? she wondered, but there was no answer. There'd never been any. Did she really believe Tomás was going to show up somehow, coalesce from his limbo and honor their ten-year-old promise of visiting the caldera together?

She'd been a fool, if she'd ever believed that. A romantic, besotted fool.

Around her, the caldera was silent: this early in the morning, the rare tourists were still making the arduous climb to the summit.

Tomás wouldn't be here. If he was still alive—if the junta had spared him—he'd have tried to find her before. He'd have called.

Part of her knew that. The other part—the one that remembered the moist feel of his hand in hers, the acrid smell of chili and fried oil as they wandered through El Águila's marketplace—still believed that something would happen. That Tomás would return, or give some kind of sign, at least. Something. Anything.

As if, Patricia thought. She snorted, shaking her head.

She started walking around the lake, listening to the wind rustling in the branches, the water lapping at the scattered rocks, the leaves crackling under her feet.

It was a beautiful, peaceful place; far, far removed from the military jeeps and barricades in El Águila. Tomás would have loved it.

She could guess, though, what he'd have said: All this, all this fertile earth, had only come because of the destruction wrought by the lava. Trust Tomás to see both sides of things—but never to foresee trouble. Never to foresee that he might be the one caught in the lava's path.

"I thought you'd be here," she whispered. "You promised." Around her, the wind grew stronger and stronger—carrying to her a perfume that she'd remember anywhere: sweat mingled with that ludicrous raspberry aftershave Tomás had so favored.

Her heart missed a beat. "Tomás?"

No answer; just a tingling sensation at the base of her neck, as if something—someone—were stroking her skin. The wind whispered to her, endlessly repeating some plea, but she could not understand its language.

Tomás…

She rose, and felt the wind tug at her, push her toward the borders of the caldera—toward a place that was somehow different: ahead of her, a fall of debris had broken the smooth, verdant slope to reveal the black bones of the earth underneath.

There was something about the uncovered stones—some coiled warmth that Patricia could feel, even from afar. The wind, having brought her here, died—but the smell remained, that oh-so-familiar smell that made her long for the irretrievable past.

She knelt by the black stones. They quivered under her fingers—like a trapped heart, she thought, but that wasn't quite right. It was more like… straining. Something straining to break free.

Up close, the surface wasn't completely smooth, but instead made of hundreds of layers that seemed to have folded on themselves, over and over, pressing hard on each other to form an intricate pattern that looked hauntingly familiar—but she couldn't work out where she had seen it. Shards of the black stone littered the ground.

"What do you want?" she whispered, but nothing spoke.

Her gaze fell on the shards. None of them appeared whole—though how she'd define whole she wasn't so sure. On impulse, she picked one of the larger ones and put it inside her jeans pocket.

She waited, standing by the black vein of stone, hoping for a sign, for something more than the heartbreaking smell. But nothing came, and eventually the smell vanished, leaving her standing alone and small and defeated on the verdant earth.

Nothing left.

Damn him.

She wiped her eyes—uselessly trying not to cry, not over the shattering of her unrealistic hopes. Then, feeling more empty by the minute, she climbed out of the caldera and headed back to her rented car.

The tourists' market had sprung up since she'd arrived, a small, almost desperate affair: two stalls with yellowed postcards, faded ceramic ornaments—and dolls in the shape of skeletons. In spite of herself, Patricia stopped to pick one up.

"This is for the Night of the Dead," the woman by the stall said. "To protect yourself against evil spirits."

The Night of the Dead. She'd forgotten. No, she hadn't—she had blocked the images of her and Tomás caught in the feverish dance with the brightly dressed locals, and the way the dance had ended: with Tomás caught in the arms of a man costumed as death. Caught. Vanquished.

"No, thanks," she said, more disturbed than she had been within the crater. "I'll make my own protections."

She drove back to the hotel in silence, overtaking military trucks and tanks—and each time wondering whether the scared civilians inside the vehicles were cooperating, or already under arrest. She couldn't help herself.

> ***Where to Eat:***
>
> *Hotel/Restaurante San Azrael: on the road to El Águila, 3 km (2 miles) from the crater. A small, picturesque restaurant that doubles as a hotel. The owner Don Miguel is always ready to welcome foreigners, and will gladly explain the subtleties of the national cuisine. We recommend the maize quails and the fried lizards' tails.*
>
> From *A Traveler's Guide to the Acamba Valley*

The hotel's restaurant was deserted. In a corner of the dining room, a TV set showed grainy images of El Águila: soldiers in jeeps, patrolling the streets with their assault rifles obscenely cradled against their chests. Familiar, all too familiar images that had already greeted her at the airport—along with the sickening knowledge that although the junta might call itself democratic on the international scene, things hadn't changed in nine years. Hadn't changed at all.

On the table before her was the stone: the jagged, elongated shard she'd picked up from the caldera. It pulsed, deep inside—pulsed with an insistent beat.

"That's a beautiful stone," someone said, in accented English.

Startled, Patricia looked up. It was only the owner of the hotel—Don Miguel—carrying a plate with her meal. "It's peculiar," she said.

Don Miguel laid the plate before her. "Around here, we call them 'plumas de los angeles.' Feathers of the angels. You only find them in the caldera. Very lucky."

It didn't look like a feather, Patricia thought—and then she saw again the pattern drawn in the rock, and she knew why it had been so familiar. Feathers. Feathers of stone. "You can't fly with stone," she said, desperately trying to dismiss the idea.

Don Miguel smiled—an expression that transfigured his angular face. He pulled the second chair, and sat facing her. "Angels, they are not birds." He tapped the shard with a lean finger. "They need strong wings."

"It looks like a blade."

Don Miguel nodded. "Wings aren't only made to fly. Sometimes you need a good weapon in Heaven." His voice was matter-of-fact—and in a way it was worse than religious fervor would have been.

"You really believe that?" Patricia asked. "That they're feathers the angels lost as they fell?"

"Some of them fell," Don Miguel said. "Without wings, they became—what's the word—trapped down here."

"Trapped in Hell," Patricia said, fascinated. "Not here."

He smiled again—a knowing, unfathomable smile. "Here is Hell." His gaze turned, for a brief moment, to take in the images on the TV set: the soldiers patrolling the marketplace of El Águila; the peasants and sellers nervously keeping out of their way.

Here is Hell. It sounded like something Tomás would have said—in one of his cynical, acerbic moods. Here is Hell.

"Bad time for foreigners to come here," Don Miguel said.

"Was there ever a good time?" Patricia asked, bitterly. She remembered hiding in the empty flat, nine years ago, as the junta swept to power—afraid of going out, afraid of facing the soldiers. All for nothing. It hadn't been her they wanted. It had been Tomás—the journalist preaching socialist ideas in his newspaper articles.

Don Miguel was silent for a while. "No. Not in the last years. It was a good country, once. But nothing lasts. Things go—sour."

"Yes." Patricia remembered Tomás smiling at her, explaining how the country was going to be a better place for everyone. For all his feigned cynicism, he'd been such a child.

"Why did I ever come back?" she asked. From the way Don Miguel's face went very still, she realized she'd spoken the words aloud.

"You were here before?"

"Only in El Águila," she said. Her meal was growing cold; but she wasn't hungry. She hadn't been hungry since she'd boarded the plane.

She said, "It was—before. I was with—" A friend, she almost said, and then realized that the words would be a betrayal of Tomás. "My lover." Her eyes stung again. Damn. She was turning into a real sentimentalist.

"I'm sorry," Don Miguel said. "You speak of him as if things had gone badly."

Patricia's hands clenched. "The junta took him." It felt odd to say it. She hadn't spoken of Tomás for such a long time—her family back home had been unable to understand why she'd cling on to a vanished man, and she'd grown used to nursing her grief on her own. "He was—he believed things could change, that everyone could be equal. It wasn't a good belief to have, at the time."

"No." Don Miguel's face was closed again—his gaze lost in some faraway place. "And you came back to look for him?"

"I don't know why I came back," Patricia said, blinking furiously. "I came—because once he promised me we'd visit the caldera on our tenth anniversary. I thought—if he was still alive—if they'd released him—maybe he'd remember. Maybe he'd find me." As she spoke, it all fell into place: he wasn't coming back. He was dead, or he had forgotten. She'd imagined the smell in the caldera—and even if it was his smell, it meant nothing. It was just

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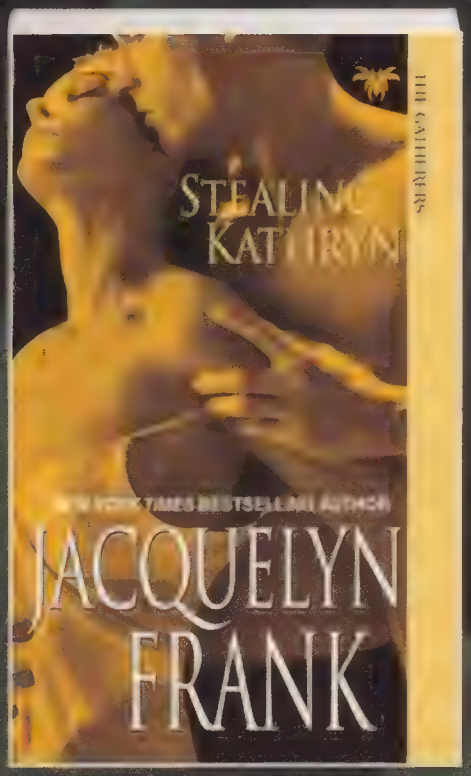

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something carried haphazardly by the wind. "And it's been all for nothing."

"Things seldom are for nothing," Don Miguel said.

"As in 'God has a purpose'?" she asked, bitterly.

Don Miguel's face twisted for a brief moment, before it became once more a smooth mask. He slid the shard toward her, and rose. "I disturb you. I will leave you to your meal."

She watched him walk away—stooped and bent, as if he'd lost something while talking to her. "Wait!" she called.

He turned, briefly, stared back at her.

"Those that the junta took—do you know what happened to them? Do they—ever come back?"

His smile was infinitely bitter. "Here is Hell. Not knowing. Not being sure whether to hope or to mourn. Enjoy your meal, Señora Patricia."

What to Buy:

Redes de Huesos (Nets of Bones). An intricate network of threads and small slivers of bones. Locals believe that the Redes trap spirits. Unlike the Indians of North America, they use those Redes to ensnare their ancestors' spirits—so that they might consult with them in the dreamworld, and share their wisdom.

From *A Traveler's Guide to the Acamba Valley*

That night, lying in her bed with the mosquito net enclosing her, Patricia dreamt of Tomás—as she'd done every night since returning to El Águila.

He was sitting inside a cell, staring at the ceiling. Burns and bruises marred his bare arms, and one of his eyes had swollen shut—the other was dull, distant, as if he no longer believed in what he saw.

His lips were moving. A prayer, she thought, but then she realized he was speaking her name, over and over.

Patricia. Patricia.

She woke up with a start. Her fingers were clenched around something sharp. Somehow, she wasn't surprised to find that she'd fallen asleep with the shard in her hand, nor that it had left a thin, red trail of blood in her palm.

The stone had changed, as if it had fed on her blood. The power coiled within seemed to have increased tenfold—it squirmed in her grasp as if eager to disgorge its heartbeat.

The wound in her palm pulsed with the same angry rhythm as the stone—with the rhythm of Tomás's prayer.

Patricia.

Shivering, she uncurled her fingers, flexed them to return some feeling to her flesh. What had it meant? Why call to her now? Because of the stone? The feathers of angels? It made no sense; none at all.

A thin sliver of moonlight came in through the shutters of the French windows—she hadn't closed them properly before going to bed.

She laid her head back against the pillow, and attempted to go back to sleep. But she was too jittery, and the more she thought about sleep the less tired she actually felt.

With a sigh, she untangled herself from the mosquito net, and went to open the shutters.

Above the plain shone the full, white moon, its cold light transmuting the trees and the vast expanse of grass into an alien, skeletal landscape—devastation made real.

Here is Hell, she thought, bleakly. Tomás…

Someone was out there.

On the terrace before the hotel doors—not thirty paces from her—Don Miguel was standing, looking at the moon. She couldn't see his face clearly; but from his whole stance emanated sorrow—sorrow and a bitter longing.

At his feet was an unwrapped bundle, its contents spread on the ground: white stones, exuding a warmth she could feel even from where she stood. The same warmth, the same kind of stones as in the caldera.

Angels' feathers, Don Miguel had called them, with a knowing gaze. Without their wings, the fallen angels became trapped here. Trapped in Hell.

She remembered his face when she'd spoken of God—it had borne the same expression as now. An expression she knew all too well: the bitter longing for what had been lost.

Wings—and the Heavens, and the City of God.

She wasn't surprised, or afraid—all that had fled, somewhere in the night. She merely opened the French windows and stepped outside, into the silence.

"'Miguel' means 'Michael,' doesn't it?" she asked.

He turned, stared at her; and his eyes became as white as the orb of the moon—for a moment only, and then they were brown again. "Correct," he said. His English was now completely unaccented—but of course he had never been a Spanish native speaker, that was just an act he'd put on.

"Michael didn't rebel against Heaven," Patricia said, groping for words that had fled. Everything felt so—unreal, so out of synch, as if she'd stepped out of time.

He was silent, for a while. "There are many ways to fall. Not all of us hurtle downward and shatter our wings. Sometimes the fall is slow—gradual. Every step taking you further and further, until one day—" He spread his hands, toward the bundle on the ground: broken fragments of chalcedony all piled together, and a fine, white dust that the wind caught and lifted into the air. "Until one day you've lost yourself."

"Why stay here?" Patricia asked.

He shrugged. "It seemed a fitting place." His face was serene—a false, jarring expression.

"You're lying."

"Because you have much experience of angels?"

"No," Patricia said. "But of mortals. And that's what you are now."

He shook his head, dryly amused. "Not quite. There are…things remaining. A shadow that is still stronger than that of mortal men."

"Why here?" she asked, stubbornly.

She thought he was going to say "Here is Hell" again, in that acid, cynical tone that reminded her of Tomás. And, if that had been the case—she didn't know what she'd have done. Hit him, perhaps. Instead, he lifted his head to stare at the moon again. "It was here that I fell."

She did not speak. She wondered how long he had been there, how many times he'd gone out on the terrace holding the crum-

bling remnants of his wings, staring at the sky and never seeing what he wanted within.

"Her name was Lucía," Miguel said. "She was a humanitarian worker."

"You fell in love?" She couldn't quite keep the shock from her voice—and then she saw the same shock mirrored in his face.

"I?" he shook his head. "No, never. But I failed her. I—lost track of her."

"You watched over her." Guarding her. Somehow, it made Patricia breathe more easily—and she knew the rest of the story, knew it because she'd seen it in his face, because she'd lived through it. Here is Hell. Not knowing whether to hope or to mourn. "And the junta took her."

Miguel shrugged. "I knew them all. Before they vanished. I remember all their names—all written in the Book."

"They're dead," Patricia said, slowly—knowing there was no other way out of the junta's jails. "They have to be."

"Sometimes, they release people," Miguel said. "It's not a kindness."

She knew what he meant—what broken beings would walk once more into the light of day. And she knew, with absolute certainty, that Tomás would prefer to be dead than to let others see him thus.

"You should go back to sleep," Miguel said, with a sigh. "The night is long."

She woke up gasping. The shard had traced another wound in her hand—another line that crossed the first at a right angle. And it kept beating—a rhythm that was almost frantic now, a beat that had to find its end, to earth itself somewhere.

"Yes," Miguel said.

"How could you lose her? I thought that angels—"

"There are dark places on Earth." Miguel's voice was quiet. "Places where there's no hope left—not even the smallest scrap of it. Only fear. Only despair. Angels can't get into those places—they eat at us like acid."

"Then it's not your fault."

"I don't know." A quiet despair filled every line of his face. "I could have followed her, instead of watching from afar. I could have—" He shook his head. "It's not the point. You don't understand. She was not the first—only the last of so many—so many even I lost count. Vanished souls. Taken away into the darkness, and I, powerless to do anything. And I—" he stared at his hands. "And I lost my wings. So I came here. To wait."

She didn't ask what he was waiting for—the same thing as her, she knew: a certainty. An end to the endless questions and worries, even if it was the silence of the grave. "Why here? Because of the caldera?"

Miguel sighed. He knelt, and carefully wrapped the shards of his wings. "The caldera remembers—what it was to fly. What Heaven was like. I can't."

She said nothing; she left him to finish his wrapping-up—though she couldn't help noticing how many wing-shards crumbled into dust at the touch of his hands.

As he rose, he asked, "Your lover. What was his name?"

"Tomás," she said, taken aback by the question. "Tomás Ruiz Macías. He was a journalist."

"Tomás Ruiz Macías." He smiled, bitterly. "He had Indian blood—you could see it in the slant of his eyes. He was a good man."

Her heart missed a beat. "You knew him?"

El Águila ([City of] The Eagle)

The largest city of the Acamba Valley, El Águila was built in the marshes, in the place where the founders saw an eagle eating a serpent on a cactus. According to the locals, the eagle was a messenger of the Archangel Gabriel, and the snake one of the Fallen Ones—an interpretation the Church has always refused to subscribe to.

From *A Traveler's Guide to the Acamba Valley*

Somehow, tossing and turning, she managed to fall asleep again. She saw angels, whirling in the sky, wings of chalcedony and obsidian slicing through the clouds—angels, bright and terrible bodies hurtling down toward the earth, each impact deepening the crater in the Acamba Valley.

And, watching them, she knew there was something about angels, something she should have remembered.

Tomás was in his cell, looking through the ceiling, and endlessly praying to her.

Patricia. Help me.

Angels and Tomás and feathers all jumbled together—and none of it making sense.

She woke up gasping. The shard had traced another wound in her hand—another line that crossed the first at a right angle. And it kept beating—a rhythm that was almost frantic now, a beat that had to find its end, to earth itself somewhere.

"What do you want?" she asked—and felt, as she had in the caldera, the wind rise around her. This time it brought despair and grief and longing into her bedroom—and it whispered in her ears, but still she could not understand its words.

"Tomás?"

No answer. Never any answer.

Morning found her, bleary-eyed, taking her breakfast in the deserted hotel's restaurant.

"Why am I the only tourist here?" she asked Miguel, who was cleaning the counter.

He shrugged. "Not a good time for foreigners."

"A worse time than the week before?"

"Tonight is the Night of the Dead," Miguel said. "And grief isn't something that can be shared with strangers."

"So they're afraid of—riots? Attacks?"

Miguel shrugged again. His face was pale—drawn tight as if in pain. Now that she knew more about him, she realized that he'd always been like that—always curled around his darkened core. "Maybe," he said. "I wouldn't know."

Patricia passed the shard from one hand to the other, feeling the coiled energy within. "What do you know about ghosts?"

Miguel laid his glass back on the bar. "No one returns from Beyond."

"So there are no ghosts?" Then why am I seeing Tomás?

"Not that I know of. Not here," Miguel said.

"I keep—dreaming about Tomás," she said. "He's asking me—things I can't understand."

His eyes snapped up, shimmering golden in the morning sunlight.

"It has to do with the shard," she said.

Miguel said nothing for a while. At length he managed, "You're asking the wrong person."

"Then whom should I be asking?" she snapped. She ought to have gone home—but she couldn't. There was only one flight per week. She had to wait.

"A curandera," Miguel said. He sounded like a doctor referring a terminally ill patient to a spiritualist: skeptical and angry, but unable to do otherwise.

> ***Local Roles:***
>
> *Curandero/a: in a development paralleling that of their Mexican fellows, the Indian shamans who used to call on pagan gods became curanderos--healers who trust in the saints and in prayers to work a peculiar brand of magic. It is sometimes difficult to differentiate a curandera from a bruja (a witch).*
>
> From *A Traveler's Guide to the Acamba Valley*

Patricia followed half-remembered paths through the warren streets of El Águila, weaving her way past the dusty buildings and the rusted skyscrapers at the heart of town. The stalls that had littered the place were all closed, their shutters down. At every second street-corner stood a couple of soldiers in khakis, smoking cigarettes and trying to appear casual.

Nothing had changed. It was still the same tense atmosphere as when she'd left.

Finally, Patricia reached the dead end she'd been looking for. Crumbling buildings stood to either side of her, blocking off the sunlight—but the smell was the same: urine mixed with incense and other fragrant herbs. She walked to the end of the impasse, her shoes squelching in the mud.

The sign was still there: a faded icon of the Virgin Mary positioned over the copper doorbell, with just a name: Doña Pilar.

The sound of the bell seemed to echo forever and ever, but finally the door opened on Doña Pilar's wizened face—she was a little paler than she'd been nine years ago, but time seemed not to have touched her either.

Beady eyes stared at Patricia. "*Sí?*"

"I need a curandera," Patricia said.

Doña Pilar said, in halting English, "You have come here before."

"A long time ago." A long time ago; and she'd brought a photograph of Tomás, and Doña Pilar had chanted over it, calling on all the saints to help—and still it had come to nothing. Tomás had vanished—beyond anyone's ability to trace. "I was—looking for my boyfriend."

"I think I remember of you," Doña Pilar said. She motioned Patricia in.

Inside, things had subtly changed: the walls were still plastered with icons of saints, but new ones had appeared—a dark-haired saint with a sword in his hands, a grinning skeleton dressed in the blue robes of the Virgin Mary. Every available surface bore a dozen lit candles. A faint chatter came from the battered radio on the mahogany dresser.

Doña Pilar stood in the center of the room, unmoving. Waiting. Patricia withdrew the shard from her pocket, and laid it between two candles. "I found this in the caldera."

"*Pluma de ángel*," Doña Pilar said, sagely.

"I—" Patricia said. "Since I found this, I hear my boyfriend in my dreams. He's praying to me, but I don't know why." She told her story as best as she could—pausing and repeating more slowly when Doña Pilar hadn't understood her English. "Someone—told me you might have answers."

Doña Pilar reached for Patricia's hand, turned it to face the light. The two red scabs seemed to pulse in the candle light. "Your boyfriend—he's one of the Desaparecidos."

The Disappeared. "Yes," she said.

"He's one of the abandoned souls."

"I don't understand."

"The junta, they say that they didn't kill the Desaparecidos," Doña Pilar said, carefully. "They say there are no corpses, nothing to prove that they are dead."

"And you—?" Patricia asked, slowly, afraid of what the answer would be.

"I hear them, and I hear what they are not saying. The Desaparecidos, they did not have a proper burial. No rites."

"No angels to take their souls," Patricia whispered, remembering what Miguel had told her about dark places. Not the Disappeared. The Forsaken.

Angels' feathers. Wings that remembered Heaven. She said, slowly, "If you can fall down to Earth in a place, you can also go into Heaven through the same place, can't you?"

Doña Pilar did not speak, and for a moment Patricia thought she hadn't understood. At last she said, carefully, "*Una puerta se abre por dos lados*. A Gate opens both ways."

Both ways. And tonight was the Night of the Dead—the only night when spirits might roam the earth.

She knew what Tomás wanted, then. A way out.

He'd do anything to claim her & everything to keep her.

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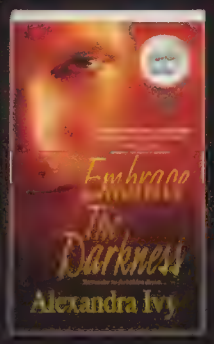

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Local Customs and Symbols:

Blood magic: blood has an ambivalent significance. It is both the redeeming Blood of Christ, shed for the redemption of mankind, and the blood of Aztec sacrifices, used for malevolent purposes by sorcerers and witches. Whichever interpretation is chosen, there is no denying the potency of blood—or indeed of blood-ties.

From *A Traveler's Guide to the Acamba Valley*

Back at the hotel, Patricia sought out Miguel, and found him preparing lunch in the kitchen. She'd foreseen a long argument to convince him, but as it turned out, she barely had to broach the subject. He was not happy that she wanted to return to the caldera at night on what he saw as a whim, but he had no intention of letting her do so alone and unprotected.

Muttering all the while in a language she couldn't understand, he packed a flashlight and woolen blankets—and also slipped in, unobtrusively, the parcel that contained the ruins of his wings.

Sunset saw them both cresting the ridge of the volcano, and staring down at the fiery expanse of the lake.

"It's beautiful," Miguel said.

"You've never been there?"

"Too many bad memories," he said, and would not look at her.

At the bottom of the caldera, the vein of black stone Tomás had shown her on her first visit was still there, catching the last of the sunlight—smoldering with the same energy.

They sat on the grass, watching the colors leach out of the landscape—watching the sky grow darker and darker, until a solitary star shone out of the blackness.

Patricia held the shard in her hand. It grew warmer and more viscous, as if she held a living heart between her fingers.

Miguel wedged his flashlight against one of the rocks: by its feeble light she could not make out his expression.

An eternity seemed to pass before the wind rose in the crater—before the smell of sweat and raspberry aftershave filled the air, so strong she could have sworn Tomás was standing next to her.

Miguel's head came up, in the dim light—and his eyes shone like molten gold.

"Tomás," she whispered. "I'm here."

The wind blew around her, weaving its way in and out of her clothes—stroking her lips, the nape of her neck, the tips of her breasts. And, gradually, as more and more stars joined the first in the sky, the language it spoke changed from alien words into something she could understand.

Patricia. Come.

She rose slowly, carried by the wind. Slowly, she descended the slope until the waters of the lake lapped over her feet.

Something was moving, under the water—faint, phosphorescent lights, like fish from the abysses. They whirled and merged, always changing directions, always growing stronger.

And then they were no longer lights, but transparent heads, breaking the surface of the water. The bodies followed: all translucent, as if not quite there: men and women, dressed in the same drab uniform—prison garb, she thought, chilled. All of them had bruises and open wounds—a little girl had one side of her head missing, as if blown away by some explosion.

Forsaken souls.

Behind her, Miguel was silent—watching as they emerged. When the first of them reached the shore—a small brunette with electric burns, whose left arm hung out of joint—he said, "Lucía García Hernández."

She looked at him, her eyes vacant—no, not vacant, pulsing with the same anger as the stone shard in Patricia's hand. But she did not answer. She moved aside, to let the next soul approach—an old man whose face was distorted by bruises.

"Álvaro Pérez Moreno," Miguel said, and the man stood aside, too. Miguel's face was translucent, the taut skin revealing the silvery shape of his bones. "Mercedes Cruz Gutiérrez. Carmela Ortiz Reyes. Elisa Soto Muñoz…"

Patricia had no idea how long it went on, this uninterrupted procession. The ground under her feet was getting warmer and warmer—shaking, trembling as if the volcano were on the verge of waking up.

At last, at long last, she heard Miguel's strangled voice. "Tomás Ruiz Macías."

And he was standing beside her, exactly as she had seen him in her dreams: covered in bruises and burns, one eye swollen shut. No, not quite the same: a gunshot wound had opened in his chest, endlessly bleeding on the ground. "Patricia."

She would not weep. She would not break. "I've—" She swallowed. Her throat hurt, as if she were bruised inside. "I've waited so much for you."

He smiled, a little sadly. "I know." Behind him, more Desaparecidos were emerging from the lake. Miguel, swaying, was still naming them. What had he said, in the hotel? *I knew them all. I remember all their names—all written in the Book.*

"Let's walk," Tomás said. He took her hand in his—he had so little substance, he was so cold; it was like being carried by the wind.

They came to stand a little away from the shores of the lake, she walking, he gliding. "I'm sorry," Tomás said, after a while, releasing her hand.

"I—it wasn't your fault," Patricia said. "How long—"

He shrugged—an odd, fluid, inhuman gesture. "I'm not sure. Eight years, maybe?"

"I waited," Patricia said. The landscape had blurred.

His voice was grave. "I, too. But I couldn't—do anything."

She raised her eyes, to stare at the sky over the caldera. "And what happens now? You fly into Heaven?"

"I don't know," Tomás said. "I—I've never found out. I thought the shards—" He spread his hands, helplessly.

"I can't help you." She turned to look at Miguel, who had fallen to his knees in the mud, tears streaming down his face. No, he couldn't help either. "I'm not the one you should have gone to."

"Who else?"

She shook her head, uselessly. There were no damned answers. None at all.

Her gaze fell on the stone shards littered at their feet: the fragments of wings, shattered past repair. No, she thought, slowly, not quite. Miguel's wings had been shattered beyond repair: crumbling into dust as she'd touched them.

Unbidden, Miguel's words came back to her: *The caldera remembers what it was to fly. I can't.*

She felt, once more, the growing energy within the stones, and the wounds in her hands pulsing with the same rhythm. The black shard had dug the wound—and each time it had pulsed stronger. Each time…

Before she could think, she took the shard, and sliced into her palm. A fiery pain spread through her hand, and drops of blood fell onto the stone—they sizzled as they touched it, and then vanished, absorbed into the obsidian.

In her hand, the shard was pulsing, contracting like a living thing—a beating heart, a straining wing. "Here," she said, and handed it to Tomás.

For a moment she thought Tomás wouldn't catch it—and then his hand closed over it. He screamed in pain, and opened it again. The stone tumbled to the ground, still angrily pulsing—but somehow, part of it remained in Tomás's hand, crawling up his arm: a flickering darkness broken by flashes of light.

Under her, the caldera shook—no, not the caldera, the whole world, as if soundless thunder had struck. She had to close her eyes. When she opened them again, Tomás was standing exactly where he'd been—save for the two grey wings on his back. They were beating already, frantically straining to bear him upwards.

"Wait—" Patricia said.

The face he turned toward her was transfigured, the wounds still there, but somehow part of him—healed and yet still there.

The wings stilled—but she knew it was only temporary, that they wanted to go back to their birthplace. Tomás stood by her side, one ghostly hand resting on her shoulder—and she felt his immense strength flow into her.

The Desaparecidos were climbing the slope toward her, their gaze a silent prayer.

Help us.

Lucía García Hernández knelt, and took up the shard Tomás had dropped. Again, a concussion; thunder without sound. And grey wings that beat against the darkness of the stars, already carrying her aloft.

The Desaparecidos crowded around Patricia, suffocating her. She did the only thing she could think of: she knelt by the shards, and, opening new wounds in the palms of her hand, let blood drip on all of them.

They came, a silent procession; every one of them taking a shard; every one of them growing wings; every one of them flying away until they were pinpoints of light in the sky. Patricia was growing light-headed from loss of blood; she laid a hand on the ground to stop the world from spinning around her.

And then Miguel was kneeling by her side, spreading on the ground the remnants of his wings; cutting deeply into the palms of his hands and handing the white shards to the Desaparecidos like offerings at a church altar. He was speaking in that strange language again—a litany that seemed a lament for the dead.

"Go on," Tomás whispered. She felt his strength, buoying her up—giving the courage she needed.

It seemed never to end, that line of ghosts climbing the slopes with outstretched hands. It seemed…her hands wouldn't stop shaking, and Miguel's face was growing paler and paler. The world whirled and spun around her, and still she cut into her skin. Still she bled to give them wings. To watch them ascend into the sky; going into the darkness—to whatever was at the end of the road.

Their song, as they flew into the air, was the same: *Remember us.*

At last, at long last, the crater was empty—but it didn't stop. Something flowed from the shards at her feet—an invisible tidal wave that converged on Miguel. Shadows played across his skin, flickering like a forest fire, climbed toward his heart.

An explosion of light flooded the caldera.

"Miguel?" she asked, blinded by the radiance. The light diminished, until once more she could see a silhouette slowly unfolding from its crouch.

What rose from the lake shores was not Miguel; not Michael; no angel that she had ever seen.

His wings were black, the same color as obsidian, and their tips were still stained with blood. His face was streaked with ashes, and in his hand was the shadow of a flaming sword.

"Miguel," she whispered. She would have fallen to her knees, but Tomás still held her—still bore her upwards, effortlessly.

Miguel raised the sword, and she felt an immense sorrow wash over her—a burning desire to abase herself and make amends for her cowardice—for not coming back for Tomás, for not having had the courage to face the junta.

Tomás's grip on her tightened. "Don't let him in," he said.

Shivering, she stood, facing the black-winged angel. What was he? "I'm not the one you should be after," she said.

Miguel raised bloodshot eyes to her—as if he'd forgotten who he was. His gaze moved from her to Tomás, slowly. The sword was quivering in his hand.

Then he leapt into the sky with a scream like a dying man, and was gone—not upwards, not fading away, but instead flying towards El Águila, growing less and less solid the further he went.

Patricia turned, to face Tomás.

"I'm sorry things turned out this way," he said, with the ghost of a smile.

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. Go."

He stared at her.

"Go," she whispered. "You're free."

At length he smiled, and bent toward her. His lips brushed hers—burning like fire, like lava. "Thank you," he said.

He rose into the air, and the sound of his beating wings was the Desaparecidos's song: *Remember us. Remember us.*

She stood, shaking, at the bottom of the caldera, staring at the sky and the hundreds of stars. Under her was the warmth of the stones, almost entirely drained away by the upwards flight of the Desaparecidos. And, somewhere above her, the being that had been Miguel flew toward El Águila, his sword a pinpoint of light into the darkness. ☙

Aliette de Bodard lives and works in Paris, in a flat with far more computers than she needs. Her short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in publications such as *Interzone, Asimov's Science Fiction,* and *Fantasy Magazine;* she has been a Campbell Award finalist and a Writers of the Future winner. Her first novel, the Aztec fantasy *Servant of the Underworld*, will be released in August 2010. Visit http://www.aliettedebodard.com for more information.

Sometimes the problem with gifts is not so much knowing what they are but in knowing how best to use them.

SULTANA LENA'S GIFT

by Shweta Narayan
Illustration by Stephanie Pui-Mun Law

When the message from Sarangpur arrived, the young Emperor of India dismissed his wives early and paced the inlaid harem floors while moon shadows grew along his path. He left in the hour before Fajr, when the last lamps guttered and night winds overlaid silence; not to bed, nor to the Durbar where his counselors would gather, but to the lower palace and the metalworkers' hall. With his foster mother, his foremost advisor, he did not speak at all—for it was her son who had written to him with insolence bordering on treason.

"And what will it do to her," he asked the Artificer bird, stalking to the end of her chamber, "if I answer this challenge as I should? If I march on him?" He spun, the brocade skirt of his jacket sweeping a feather's width from the latticework of gears and pulleys on her workbench.

The bird's diamond-film lenses clicked from one focus setting to another. She said, "I could hardly claim to know Maham Anga well." An understatement; the old woman would not enter a room until any mechanicals had been thrown out. She'd be furious to know who the Shah-en-shah spoke to now.

He said, "It might kill her."

"So don't march on him."

"How could I not?"

"Praise him for winning Sarangpur."

"And have every other general wondering how much *he* can get away with if he wins me a battle? Deal with the mechanicals himself, he says. Ha. Read this for me."

Gears whirred. She shifted on her perch, spread her wings for balance, and held out a hand of perfectly articulated copper, as large and human as his own. He smacked a sheaf of paper into it and went back to stalking like one of his own caged tigers.

She spread the top sheet of looping calligraphy on her writing desk and started reading the elegant, elaborate phrases in a tone so flat it should have made him laugh. But she got no reaction at all until the mechanicals came up; then he burst out, "Three

thousand clockwork soldiers from the maharaja's army, and he sends me three?"

She read ahead for a little while. "He does say he'll destroy the rest."

"How is that good?"

"Better than a threat."

"And I'm to believe it's not?" It ended on a boyish squeak. He cleared his throat. "Though…do you think I might?"

She slid the first page aside and stepped delicately onto the second. A whiff of human sweat washed over the dry scents of paper and machine oil as he came to peer over her wing. After a moment he said, "Maybe it's plain truth. Maybe he just doesn't trust them." His voice angled up with hope. "It would be just like Adham to play the big brother and decide for me, wouldn't it? He'd hardly betray me."

She cocked her head, ratchet clicking, and said, "The curse of power is that anybody might betray you."

"I know." Lamplight glittered on jewels and embroidery. One hand on the desk, one to his face, he let his head drop into shadow. "I do know; but…lady, I might have to *kill* him."

"You've killed before."

"Tigers. Mechanicals. Infidels." He shook his head. "This is different. How could a man of the faith consider murder?"

She chimed oiled-copper tailfeathers together, a sound barely heard that nonetheless made him startle. It was one she'd made often when a young prince, then a too-young emperor, had not attended to his lessons. She said, "How can a man of your faith be a king of kings at all?"

"I protect my people." It came out more sullen than proud; he frowned, turned away, threw himself upon the divan.

She said, "Then your question is answered."

"No. It's not. What sort of monster must I be to—and how *dare* he turn me into—ahh, I'm too angry to think."

"Evidently." She gathered up the papers. "Truly, child, must you jump before checking the ground? You've said yourself you don't know what he intends."

A pause, then, "So." He looked up, fire back in his eyes. "I must find out. Quickly. If he's truthful, we may speak as brothers; and if Allah is so kind, I'll be glad to beg forgiveness for the violence of my thoughts."

"Adham will surely be sorry to know he made you so angry."

He snorted laughter.

"Now is that fair?" she murmured, knowing that it was. Adham Khan—who once unscrewed a clockwork slave's joints and ordered him to dance, and laughed until he cried when the man fell apart midstep—Adham would find his Emperor's fury a fine joke. And he wouldn't lose a chance to tell the story, either. "What if he lied? How will you know, at Sarangpur, how he repays your gift of trust?"

The Shah-en-shah took a hard breath. "If I find the soldiers standing…"

"Then, assuming you've taken a force small enough to be fast, you'll be outnumbered. Overpowered."

"Bah," he said. "They thought that tiger would overpower me too. I'll have surprise." He propped himself up on one elbow and smiled crookedly. "But come with me, old friend."

"I? You need politicians and generals, not an old toymaker."

"I need counsel. Help me see the way through this."

She dropped the papers next to his arm and landed on the nearest perch. "As though you would follow the way another showed," she said. "I will of course do as you wish; but if you want me to be helpful, Akbar, bring along the new mechanicals. Let me study them, in case Adham uses their kin."

Far to the west and far to the north, across mountains and seas, across empires and hidden villages, in a land where snow falls on flat land for half the year and drains color out of the people, there lived a young sultana. Her name was Lena, and her face and hair were pale as a faded sketch; and in these lands, she was thought to be beautiful.

Lena was the sultan's last child. Her mother died birthing her, and her brothers and sisters did not live through many frozen winters. So she had all of her father's love, and her husband would have all his land besides. From her mother she had a gift—a prayer borne on dying breath, answered by the land's strange gods.

Now, these were cruel gods and fickle, as such gods are, and the gifts they gave were likewise cruel. The mother had been certain she was carrying a boy, and prayed for all his wishes to come true; and so, any boy or man could make a wish before the sultana, as long as it did not touch her in any way, and it was granted.

The sultan was careful of his daughter and of her power. Her servants were the wives of his courtiers, and her playmates were their daughters. He kept her hidden away from all men but himself, though that was not the custom in his savage lands. And so he thought she was safe.

But unknown to him, Lena did know a boy: the vizier's son, a gangly youth with hair like new copper, who played with her in hidden gardens. She was fond of him in her way, and he adored her, and risked beatings and worse for the honor of bringing her baked apples and chasing after her filigreed silver ball.

If he made wishes while they played together, they were silent.

"Tell me what you think of the mechanicals," said the Shah-en-shah to the lady perched on his shoulder. He was riding at the front of his army, not on a sleek mechanical but a sweating horse which snorted and rolled its eyes each time she shifted balance.

At least it wasn't an elephant.

"They are—" A marvel of craftsmanship. Enticingly beyond her own skill. "Cleverly made, their springs wound by sunlight and captive steam." They didn't need winding up. They didn't need humans.

"They must be able to follow orders, of course, but do they understand those orders as well as men?"

"Yes." Better. They were subtle and patient, as unlike the pretty toys Akbar delighted in as calligrapy to a child's scribble. As unlike Akbar's squabbling, short-sighted generals as—well, as she was. Had the southern maharaja's strategy matched his soldiers, the imperial army might now be in ruins.

No wonder Adham had kept them.

"Can you stop them from attacking?"

"Do you believe in a merciful god? I'll do my best."

"Ah." He kicked his horse into a canter.

She pushed aloft to fly beside him in comfort; he wouldn't listen to much in this temper, anyway. When he slowed, she settled on his arm.

He said, as though he hadn't paused, "It may come to nothing. He's probably taking them apart as we speak."

She rubbed her beak against his shoulder, and said, "Perhaps."

He sighed. His arm dropped a little under her.

"A pity, really," she murmured. "They would be a glorious jewel in the army of the Light of Heaven."

The time came, as such times do, for sultana Lena to wed. She went to the sultan and said, "I have given you many wishes, Father, willingly and with love. May I ask just one wish from you?"

"Of course, child," he said with a doting smile. "I would give you anything you want."

She said, "Let me choose my own husband."

So when sultans and younger sons from all over came to visit, her father granted only permission to visit Lena. Each man might speak to her through a wooden lattice, and she asked each one the same question: "What would you wish for, if you were before me?"

"I would wish for glorious conquest," said one, "and bring back the treasures of far-off lands to lay at your feet."

Another said, "I would wish for beautiful children to give us both joy."

"I would wish for love to blossom between us," said a third, "and spread througout the land in a burst of life: rich wheat and fruit heavy on the trees, health and friendship in the people."

And she thanked them all, and walked out into the garden to find the vizier's son.

He was waiting for her. The vizier's son had grown up skinny and near-sighted, with a constant squint and a tendency to lean too close to people to see their faces; but he had also grown up quite as clever as his father, and he had known that she would come. "What did they say?" he asked her, though he had a fair idea.

"Leon," she said—for that was his name—"what would you wish for, if I were to offer you my gift?"

"I would ask what you thought," he said, "and make only the wishes that we decided between ourselves would be best."

"Good," she said. "I'll marry you."

"I suppose," said the Shah-en-shah, leaning back on the divan, "that with her power and her weakness, she needed someone she could trust."

The lady nudged a bowl of mangoes across the floor with her wing, feathers clinking. He selected one, turned it in his hand, breathed in its scent. They were alone in his tent. Little lamps threw stars into his turban jewels and shadows all around.

He added, "You're telling me that I need to be able to trust those I keep close."

"Was I reading you a lesson? Here I thought I was telling you a story. To *stop* you fretting."

He laughed and started cutting the mango into red-gold strips. "And I allow it to be an odd tale. Imagine marrying a vizier's son—and for love!" He licked juice off his fingers.

"Oh, you think she loved him?" The lady spread her wings and rippled the feathers. "I suppose she could risk that—so long as she knew he took her counsel…"

The two were soon wed, for Lena's father was too noble a man to take back his promise. And in time young Leon came to rule. He wore the golden circlet on his tiger-bright hair and sat alone on the throne, but he spoke with his sultana about each important ruling and about his every wish. Thanks to her wisdom the land enjoyed rich harvests, but kept the harsh winters and heavy rains the crops needed. Its magistrates were honest and wily, but thieves and murderers did not suddenly die, for—as Lena pointed out—might the gods not also strike down beekeepers and butchers?

They won a few wars, conquered a few lands; not so many as to invite attack. And not so many as to keep them always apart. They had two daughters and a son before they had been married five years, and so their joy increased.

But on the day Lena learned that her younger daughter, Sabeth, had inherited her gift, that joy crumbled and blew away on the wind.

For Leon danced in the hallways with little Sabeth, laughing and shouting the news to the court; but Lena knew the burden of her gift. Though she loved her people, she barely ever saw them, and never close enough for men to wish on her. She had not wanted such a life for her daughter.

And she had not thought Leon cared so much about the power.

They sat around the firepit outside Akbar's tent, gleaming sleek, cooling with little pings in the star-bright air. The Artificer's feathers shivered just to see them again. She came to rest on one soldier's broad shoulder. Bronze hummed beneath her hands as he stood.

A pair of guards drew near, crossbows at the ready. They relaxed only a little when the lady spread her wings.

"I'm taking this one to scout ahead," she said.

"And we should believe you, mechanical?"

"Would you rather wake the Shah-en-shah to check his orders? Come," she added to the soldier. Springs uncoiled. She launched into the air. "Let's take a walk."

His attention focused on her like heat through a lens, but he merely bowed a deep *salaam* to the guards.

They cut into the southern forest, disturbing its hissing rustle as little as clockwork might. Only when silence grew leafy and dark around them did he say, "And were there orders for them to check?"

She laughed. He held out a hand; she fluttered down to perch on it. He said, "Will your human take us in?"

"I've fed him the thought."

"Among others, no doubt."

She preened a spot of tarnish from a tailfeather. "It is," she said, "what I do."

Now, the sultan of a neighbouring land took offense when Lena married a vizier's son, and their border had never been quite peaceful since. Leon watched their armies. "I shall wish for us to defeat them," he told Lena.

Lena said, "No, wish rather for there to be no war at all." For she watched their sultan's eldest son, who was not so much older than Sabeth.

"That would be a mistake," Leon said.

She might have grown angry then, but he murmured caressing words; and hadn't they always been the best of friends? She let him soothe her into joy, then sleep.

The next day, when he visited his daughters, Leon sat Sabeth on his knee and laid his bearded cheek against her soft red-gold hair, and he wished to win the war. The day after that, the messengers came. And Leon went off to fight.

The sultana raged. She broke vases, she wept, she screamed, "How dare he!" How dare he think he knew better than her how to care for her land? How dare he ruin her plans and her hopes? For even if his move was not so very unwise, she could never again be sure of him.

How dare he expect a sultan's daughter to take that meekly?

So she had Sabeth taken far away to grow up hidden, unknown, and safe; and when her daughter's laughter no longer played like music in the halls, she filled a silver bowl with salt tears.

Then she went, veiled, to court, and she chose a lover.

It was easily done. She had mystery and magic, and rumors of her beauty ran so strongly through the land that men in distant towns wrote poems of love. The chance to lift that veil, to see the snow-sculpture beneath… no, her trouble was picking the lover, not finding one. And so she did—a young man of unimportant family; dark-eyed, passionate, and perhaps a little foolish.

She teased this young man cruelly, flirted and hinted and drew him away to shadowed corners. One day she let him raise her veil and gaze stunned into her eyes; but when he leaned forward to kiss her, she pulled back. "Now," she scolded, though her smile still teased, "remember if you please that I am a married woman."

Ragged with love, the young man whispered, "I wish you were not."

She had him executed, of course, for that was treason; and never again did a man dare wish to her face without leave. But when Sultan Leon's body came back with the victorious army, the sultana sat already on her throne, the golden circlet holding her veil in place. She was ready—with courtly allies, with treaties, with a marriage proposal between the defeated sultan's son and her elder daughter—and nobody dared disobey her. So she ruled, wisely and well, for many, many years.

Sarangpur's farms pocked the forest, and the Shah-en-shah had given up his horse for a lumbering elephant. Humans found them intimidating. He sat back in the palanquin as though they were not lurching side to side and said, "But whatever happened to Sabeth?"

The Artificer bird said, "She must have been happy, don't you think? Away from those who might claim love, only to use her power and her youth for their own ends."

He looked away. "You should have stopped the tale before when Lena and Leon—"

They passed the last trees. Beyond the haze of cotton fields, Sarangpur gleamed bronze with soldiers. They stood proud in rows along each road, like rays around the sun. Akbar stared. First at them, then in mute appeal at her.

She handed him a pipe. "You won't be able to hear this," she said. "Dogs will; so will the soldiers. Blow it as hard as you can and they won't move."

He took it blindly, stars drowning in his eyes. His face crumpled; struggled; remade itself on older, grimmer lines. "Well," he said. "Now I know."

"Whatever was that nonsense with the whistle?" The soldier's voice was soft and low.

The bird of bronze and copper perched next to him while he wound her up. The other two sat nearby, hands up to greet the sun. She'd offered to stay with them so the emperor might have every able hand at Sarangpur. She said, "Surely you don't think I would lie to him?"

"Indeed," said the soldier, "he blew on it, it screeched, and you say my kin will not move. But why, I wonder, will they not move?"

"Because they never had orders to, young brother," she said.

"You spoke with them?"

"Last night, though I knew it all along. Adham Khan, use mechanicals? He fears us almost as much as he hates us."

"Yet they stand in formation. They are not pulled to pieces."

"Oh, he'd have set out to dismantle them once the city was secure." As it hadn't been secure, of course, when he sent word to Akbar. Adham, wait till all was done before he showed off? "Meantime, he had to put them somewhere. Why not where they scared off trouble?"

Another soldier stretched, releasing the clean smell of warming oil, and said, "What a pity for him, then, that your human came so soon."

"Just so," she said. She tucked her wings back, gleaming in the sun, and let the winding tighten and warm her heartspring. It was well.

As for Akbar…

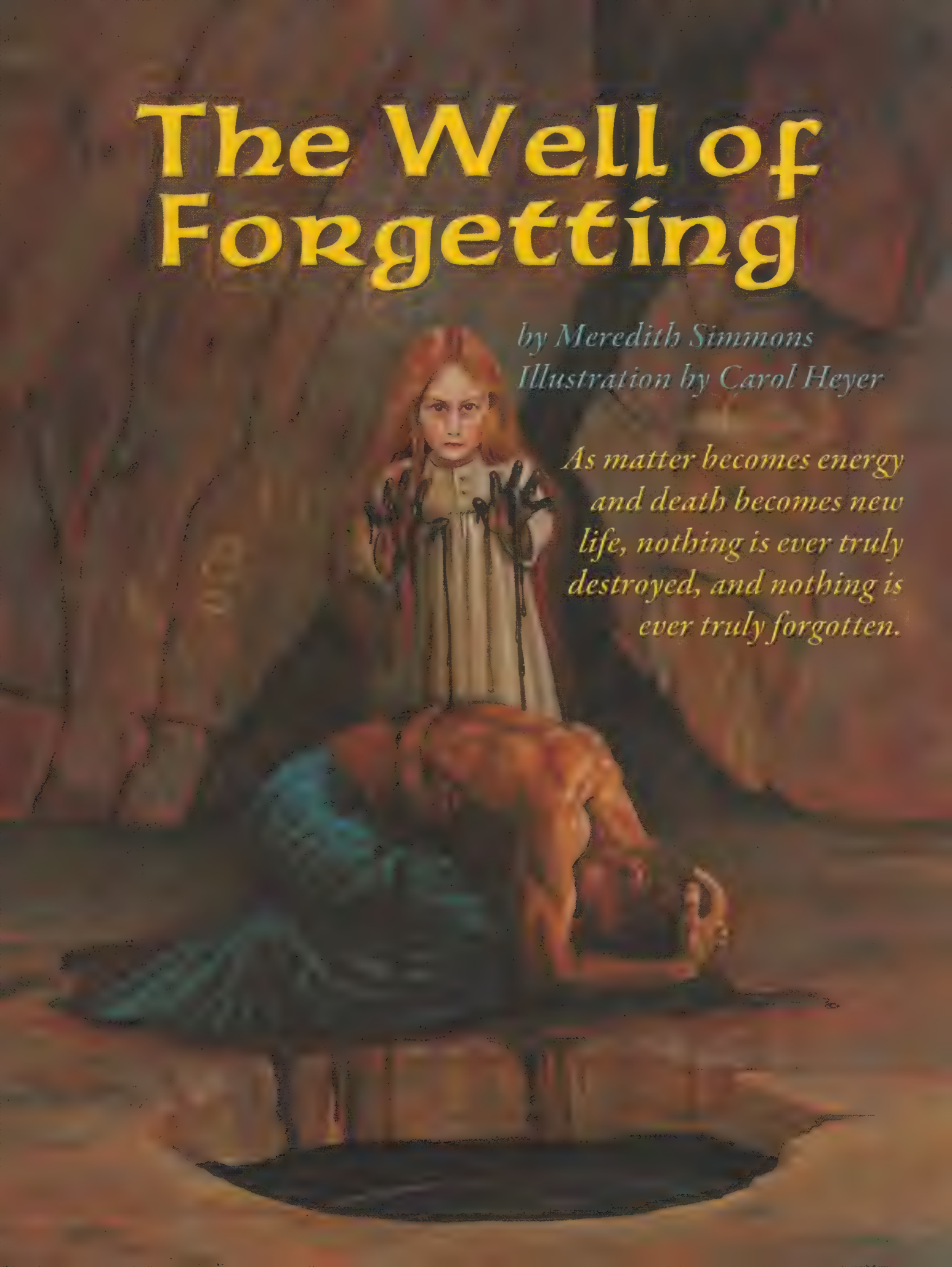
He knew what to think now. If what he thought was not precisely truth, why, that was Adham Khan's problem. And his mother's.

And now that the young emperor had found his certainty—and the strength to act on it—he would rule wisely and well indeed. ☙

Shweta Narayan has lived in six countries on three continents, and read and loved folk tales and fables in all of them. The framing narrative in "Sultana Lena's Gift" is based on a historical event, but the Artificer bird made Lena up. This is the bird's second appearance. The first is in *Shimmer*'s Clockwork Jungle issue, and the third shall be in the *Clockwork Phoenix 3* anthology. It's unlikely to be her last. Shweta's other work has appeared in such publications as *Strange Horizons, GUD,* and *The Beastly Bride* anthology. She was the Octavia E. Butler Memorial Scholarship recipient for Clarion 2007. She can be found on the web at http://shwetanarayan.org/.

The Well of Forgetting

by Meredith Simmons
Illustration by Carol Heyer



As matter becomes energy and death becomes new life, nothing is ever truly destroyed, and nothing is ever truly forgotten.

Hepta was in her fifth year when her parents first brought her to the Well of Forgetting. The journey had been long and hungry, an act of love and desperation. An Acolyte of the Well, who chose them from the gathered masses at the chasm entrance, recognized the poverty before him and asked for only three coppers to strip the memories from the child.

"Do you think this is necessary?" the Acolyte asked. "How many memories can one so young have that should not follow her through the rest of her life?"

"She has memories of dreams," Hepta's mother replied, knowing of no other way to explain. "The recitation of these dreams frightens all those around her. The people of the village shun her. She is solitary, and that is not a happy life for a child."

The Acolyte saw the problem, but suspected that it had nothing to do with remembered dreams. Hepta's parents were people of the dust, gray of hair, gray of skin. Their neighbors would be the same, other dust people who lived at the edge of the Waste and had taken on its coloring. Yet, somehow, this couple had borne a child of flame, her skin golden, her hair a vibrant mix of reds and yellows. She would be shunned for her coloring even if she bore no darkness in her memory.

Believing that he had only to go through the motions of a cleansing, the Acolyte led the parents and the child into the chasm. The steep canyon walls narrowed the broad, blue sky into a strip above them, casting the area around the open mouth of the Well into shadow. The Acolyte indifferently intoned the Prayer of Arrival as they shuffled forward in a line of other supplicants and acolytes.

When they finally arrived at the Well, the Acolyte placed his hands on either side of the child's head. He didn't ask her to think upon the memory that was to be expunged, since nothing specific had been mentioned. He just looked for any dark shapes within the girl's mind, expecting nothing.

To his horror, he discovered that all of the child's memories were encased in a mass of roiling, septic darkness. Vile malevolence and perversity saturated her mind. It was as if the child's small body had absorbed the evil of an entire village. Never before had the Acolyte seen such concentrated foulness. Sweat dripped from his face and pooled under his arms; his gorge rose.

But the Acolyte performed his office. In shock, he gathered up all the putrid, depraved thoughts and cast them into the Well.

Thus, Hepta lost all memories of her early childhood. The Acolyte, however, remembered, and hanged himself three moons later.

In her eleventh year, Hepta's father again brought her to the Well of Forgetting. The girl was tall and slender, the buds of her breasts just becoming evident. Her hair was a wild corona of sunburst colors surrounding a mobile face with eyes of burnished copper. Three different Acolytes saw her wandering among the supplicants' tents that were spread across the plain before the chasm. All hurried toward her, drawn by her unique beauty.

The youngest of the three proved to have the fastest legs. He smiled at the pretty girl and her drab father. "Do you have tormenting memories that you need to bring to the Well of Forgetting?" he asked.

"My wife has recently died," the father began.

"Ah," said the Acolyte, "the Well will enable you to forget your grief."

"No, I come not for myself. I'm here for my daughter. I promised my wife that I would bring her here in the hopes that all the blackness of her mind could be removed so that she may make a satisfactory marriage."

The Acolyte looked at the shining girl and wanted to shout, "What blackness?" He wondered if there was some way to remove the father's delusions without his consent. The girl looked too young to be espoused, but the Acolyte imagined that such beauty would bring many offers of marriage. His role was to be a conduit, not a judge, so he said to the father, "This may all be done for five silvers," and held out his hand.

"Five silvers?" The dust-colored man blanched even whiter. "The last time we were charged only three coppers. I don't have five silvers."

While few people haggled over the price of a cleansing, this was not what disturbed the Acolyte. What upset him was the reference to "the last time."

"You've brought your daughter here before?"

"Yes," said the father. "Six years ago, and Hepta was greatly helped by it. For nearly two years she was free of her ugly dreams. Then slowly they again began to build. She screams in the night of incest within Larshe's house, she cries out against wife-murder whenever she sees the widower Gerrel. She, no, we are now shunned within our village. I think fear for our daughter's future contributed to my wife's death."

The Acolyte looked closely at the distraught man. He looked closely at the silent girl. Beneath her bright beauty, deep in her copper eyes, the Acolyte saw nothing, a void that seemed

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to draw him, to suck at his mind, even his very soul. It was as if he'd gazed into the Well of Forgetting.

Shaken, he broke eye contact. He had heard whispers of such things, but had not believed them. Yet, here it was before him. A Living Well.

"I must ask my superiors if the fee may be reduced," the Acolyte said, anxious to be away. "If you stay here tonight, someone will speak to you tomorrow."

The Acolyte made good his escape, but he didn't go to his superiors. Although the girl frightened him, he was even more afraid that his conclusion that she was a Living Well was mistaken and that he would look like a fool to those above him. He instead went to one of the taverns that flourished on the edge of the pilgrims' tent city and tried to find a solution within the dregs of many cups of wine.

Their smiles were the first things that registered in Hepta's mind. She looked around her with new eyes, seeing the smooth, worn surface of the rock that was broken by the yawning hole of the Well, the Acolyte kneeling before her, and the two smiling men.

By dusk, the Acolyte found the world a much more congenial place, although he had not arrived at a solution to his problem. He was joined at his table by Temmor, a man who frequently visited the Well of Forgetting. It was said that Temmor was a wealthy merchant from Dur, although what exactly the man bought and sold had never been made clear. The Acolyte thought him to be a man of sensitive conscience, however, since he came for a cleansing so often.

"I haven't seen you here before," Temmor said. "I thought Acolytes didn't indulge in this type of forgetting." He smiled broadly and wagged his cup.

"Only when we have our own doubts," the Acolyte replied.

"Tell me about it," Temmor said as he slid into the booth next to the Acolyte. Temmor oozed concern and understanding.

Afloat on the wine, the Acolyte did, explaining his fears that the girl was a Living Well, extolling her beauty. During the entire recitation, Temmor fixed him with sympathetic eyes, occasionally patting the Acolyte's arms with his small, soft hands.

"I may have a solution," Temmor said. "If this girl is as beautiful as you say, I may want her as a bride for my nephew. The boy is sweet but"—he shrugged his shoulders expressively—"slow. Even if she is a Living Well, I'm sure she can be cleansed. How much evil worth forgetting can be found in a small village bordering the Waste? I'll be glad to pay her fee. If she is emptied of all memories, I think she would make an ideal pairing with a boy who has no evil in him."

And so, Temmor accompanied the Acolyte when he sought out Hepta and her father the next morning. Temmor noted the small, worn tent, the rounded shoulders of the father. The girl was more beautiful than he had imagined, however. Striking with her vivid coloring, she was tall and willowy, just at the cusp of womanhood. She stirred Temmor as few women ever had.

Avoiding any mention of Living Wells, Temmor was at his most persuasive when he explained the need of a bride for his nephew. He offered to pay the required fee for a cleansing at the Well and added that he would pay Hepta's father two gold coins as a bride price.

The small, gray man was overwhelmed with good fortune. Here was a marriage offer more wonderful than either he or his wife could ever have imagined. To think that Hepta would live in the city of Dur, that she would be surrounded by luxury and have the love of a kind, young boy. Tears of gratitude leaked from his eyes and followed the meandering patterns of his seamed face.

Temmor insisted he accompany them to the Well, stressing that he thought it would be best for Hepta if her father left immediately after the cleansing.

This time the Acolyte was most diligent. All prayers were intoned with great fervor. He sensed that this could be the most difficult cleansing that he had ever done.

When they reached the Well, the Acolyte placed his hands on the girl's head. He would look for any disturbing thoughts, any memories of vile actions, and would cast them into the Well. What met his questing mind was such septic blackness that he gagged. Within the mass of darkness were flickering bright points—a straw doll, a mother's kiss, a father's smile. But these were incased in such evil that none of these shining memories were salvageable.

With great effort, the Acolyte purged the corruption from the girl's mind. The mental stench overpowered him and he fell to his knees. "It is done," he muttered through a mouth filled with bile.

Temmor and the girl's father looked pleased. Their smiles were the first things that registered in Hepta's mind. She looked around her with new eyes, seeing the smooth, worn surface of the rock that was broken by the yawning hole of the Well, the Acolyte kneeling before her, and the two smiling men.

"Come, my dear," Temmor said.

The small, gray man, no longer smiling, said only, "Goodbye, my own," and walked away. Thus, Hepta's father departed her life as if he had never been.

The blank mind of the young girl delighted Temmor. He realized that this was a blankness that he could fill to his own liking. He took Hepta back to his large well-appointed tent

and had servants perfume her and dress her in silks. They spread before her a sumptuous meal: tiny birds roasted in honey, tangy figs, ruby wine.

Hepta ate and drank and laughed at the amusing conversation from the man named Temmor.

Late that night, in the glow of fragrant lamps, Temmor stripped the silk from her child's body, fondled the buds of her breasts, and took her with lust and violence. When he was finished, he took her head in his hands and poured into her waiting mind the memory of the Acolyte lying dead in the brush, his throat a gleaming red ribbon where it had been slit.

Then sated and cleansed, Temmor rolled over and slept, his last conscious thought being one of joy that he had no nephew.

Hepta, knowing no other existence, turned away from the man and watched the shadows made by the flickering lamps on the tent wall until sleep also found her.

Hepta watched her reflection in the mirror as the servant brushed her luxurious, bright hair until it crackled. In her nineteenth year, Hepta was startlingly beautiful, her face arresting, her breasts full, her waist small. She was the woman most in demand at Temmor's house, and she was by far the most expensive. Men came to her not only for her lush body, but, more often, for her open mind that could strip from them troubling memories.

"Who comes tonight?" she asked Letta, her body servant. Then she waited patiently while Letta found the words. Hepta found it comfortable to surround herself with servants of limited mental capacity. They seemed to seek nothing of her but to serve, and she saw in their simplicity some echo of a childhood she could not recall.

"Cathar," Letta finally supplied.

"Ah, good. I think the blue silk, then." Hepta didn't mind an evening spent with the little man. Cathar was one of the best known financiers in the city of Dur, but Hepta found a loneliness in him that no accumulation of wealth could assuage. Most evenings he was satisfied with dinner and conversation. At evening's end, however, he would avail himself of Hepta's talent for removing tormenting thoughts. Most would concern small adjustments Cathar had made in the books of his clients, the better to increase his personal wealth while still retaining enough profits for others that his reputation as a brilliant man with money remained undisturbed.

The evening progressed as anticipated, Hepta pretending fascination with Cathar's discussion. Temmor had taught her well, how to please men. She was grateful, however, that she no longer had to please Temmor himself. She had long ago been replaced by a train of younger and younger girls who inhabited Temmor's suite. The screams of the latest often punctuated the night.

"If I knew exactly what the next caravan master intended to buy, I could triple my money," Cathar continued, a conversational thread that Hepta had lost.

Without thinking, she said, "Wyler is looking for long staple wool. He mentioned that last night."

Cathar's eyes took on a gleam that had nothing to do with his entrancing dinner companion. "Do you have more of this information?"

Hepta cast about in her mind. She indeed had a great deal of information, much of which the original owners wanted to keep hidden. Unlike the true Well of Forgetting, the horror and corruption that people emptied into her mind did not go away. It remained firmly within Hepta's memory.

For the first time, it occurred to her that all of the information that men whispered in the night or forced into her mind might have a value. Only something of value could bring that sharp look to Cathar's face.

"What is such information worth?" Hepta asked, playing with Cathar's bony knuckles and gazing deep into his eyes.

"Ten percent of any additional profit."

Hepta didn't know how to calculate ten percent, but it certainly meant some amount of money. Money that would come into Hepta's hands and not Temmor's.

"Let me think on it," she said, smiling.

Cathar stayed late that evening, but he availed himself of neither Hepta's body nor her open mind. When he left, however, they had both learned much.

Hepta now understood why Temmor had kept her happy by getting her the slow, childlike servants she enjoyed, why he always offered her the choice of the finest material for gowns. He made a great deal of money from her services, but at no time did any of this money belong to Hepta. Temmor held her in thrall by her poverty, by her lack of options.

Escape lay in exchanging information for actual money. Her first thought was to confront guilty parties with proof of misdeeds that they had forgotten and demand payment for her silence. But Hepta decided that this would be a dangerous path. She kept a lamp burning late into the night as she made lists of information she possessed and decided who else would pay to receive it.

Her opportunity came four nights later when her visitor was Petrell, a minor court functionary who wished to rise. Hepta knew that the short, squat Petrell most hated the tall and stately Sogeer, imagining that the taller man received preferential treatment at court based on his looks.

"How much would it be worth to you to have information that could destroy Sogeer?" she asked.

Petrell puffed himself up, his eyes gleamed, and his tongue nervously flicked over his lips. He looked more like a frog than ever. Then he named a price that was more than Hepta could imagine.

"Give that money to Cathar," she said, pretending a calm she didn't feel, "and when I know he's received it, I'll tell you."

Hepta's lists grew. Like a silken spider weaving golden webs, she carefully plotted her use of information. Cathar came frequently, but he never again touched her body or her mind. Together they were becoming wealthy.

By the time Hepta reached her twenty-third year, she was one of the richest people in Dur. Certainly the richest woman.

But it all was kept secret. Only Cathar knew the amount and the source of her funds.

As her wealth grew, however, Hepta's health declined. The foul deeds she absorbed from others sickened her. It was as if Hepta, the Living Well, had reached the saturation point, and all additional vileness spilled from her mind and into her own body. She became gaunt, her golden skin became sallow, her glorious hair faded to drabness.

"I can do this no longer," she said to Temmor, who had come to berate her about canceling yet another appointment. "I'm truly ill. I'm not malingering."

"I provide you with the best of everything. And this is how you repay me—by refusing appointments with longstanding clients? Get dressed. Do something with your hair. With all those dumb servants and your fine wardrobe, I have a great deal invested in you. And I expect a return on my money."

"I cannot," Hepta said. But she saw a possibility for obtaining her freedom. "If you're tired of my cost, perhaps you would let one of my more frequent visitors become my permanent protector. I'm sure one of them could financially make it worth your while." But her mind was thinking that she had more than enough money to buy her way free.

She didn't see the blow coming. Surprise and pain registered simultaneously as she flew back against the pillows, her face bleeding, cut by Temmor's ring. He laughed as she pulled her hand away from the wound and looked at the blood.

"You've become ugly. Does your mirror tell you that? It should. So I have no fear of marring your beauty. There are many beautiful women here in this house. But you are the only Living Well. You are the only cesspit into which men may pour their depravity and corruption, the only cleanser of conscience and soul. This is your greatest value. I could beat you senseless and it would make no difference. As long as your open mind is available, you can be propped in a chair."

He advanced on her, fist raised. Hepta shrank back, disgusted with her own helplessness. She muttered, "I'll comply."

But now Hepta's dislike for Temmor congealed into fierce, hard hatred. It was an emotion she was well acquainted with from the blackness that had been poured into her.

"There are assassins that can be purchased," Hepta said two nights later to the faithful Cathar. "I want you to find me one."

The little man looked uncomfortable. "I have no idea how to contact such people."

"But Petrell does. I know that for a fact. Approach Petrell and ask for a name. He will give it to you, I'm sure. Especially if he thinks this will now give him some power over you. Don't mention that you are on my errand. Just arrange to pay for an appointment with me for this unknown man and I'll take care of the matter myself."

"But, as you said," the financier whined, "just the knowledge of my complicity will give Petrell an edge."

"Not when I give you information to counter it," she said. Then added, "For free," and enjoyed watching relief transform his narrow face.

It was nearly eight days before the mercenary came to her chambers. Had she not known his profession, she would never have guessed. He was a compact man, obviously strong and well-muscled, but he had an open countenance, an ingratiating smile, and guileless blue eyes.

"My name is Laethan," he said. "I understand that we may do some business."

Hepta almost laughed. His expression was so innocent, so harmless, that it would have been easy to assume that the business he spoke of was buying melons. "You don't look as I expected," she blurted out.

To this the assassin did laugh. "And just how should I look? A man's actions need not show on his face. What the world sees of each of us is more a reflection of how we view ourselves than what we do. But I must admit that you don't look as I imagined either."

"In what way?"

"I've heard of the beautiful and talented Hepta; who has not? I never thought I'd have the coins needed to sample your favors. From the tales that have circulated in the bazaar, I'm just surprised that you're not—" He stopped, suddenly conscious of offence.

"Beautiful," she finished for him.

Laethan looked at the woman. What she said wasn't totally true. Her eyes were large and expressive, her face was made of interesting angles, her coloring was unique. But she looked faded, tired. "I believe that you have been ill," he said.

"Sick unto death." It was an acknowledgement she made to herself as well as to the man. Her acquired memories sickened her. Many of her own memories sickened her. But, strangely enough, what she was about to do, the dark mark she was to make on her own soul, didn't bother her at all.

"And I am to be the cure?" he asked.

"Yes, you are to be the cure." And then she told him one of her earliest memories, of the Acolyte lying in the brush, blood welling from his throat to glisten blackly in the moonlight. "It must be done in the same manner," she said. "I feel it is needed for some sort of symmetry. The man's name is Temmor, the owner of this house."

"This house and many others. You give me an action that I may perform with joy." A smile lit his face. He came forward suddenly and took both her hands in his broad, callused ones. He bowed to rest his head on their united hands, almost in a position of prayer. "You are the hand. I am the knife. By your will shall the deed be accomplished."

"Is that how you do it?" Hepta asked. "Do you mentally remove yourself from blame even before the action occurs? To take a human life is a vile deed, but I see no darkness in you. Or do you go often to the Well of Forgetting to cleanse your mind and your soul?"

Laethan straightened, and looked deeply into her eyes. "I *never* go to the Well of Forgetting." His voice was harsh, angry. "I think the Well is a greater evil than anything that I or any other may do. The Well allows people to be cleansed of their guilt without any expiation. They are free to commit heinous acts over and over again, without atonement, without suffering. They are made new for the cost of a few coins.

"I know what I do. I accept the responsibility of my actions. Yes, I do think of myself as a knife wielded by others' hands, but I am not mindless. I choose whose hand may hold my

lethal ability. If I feel the target is innocent of evil, I decline the commission."

"Then I would be an evil equal to that of the Well of Forgetting," Hepta said. "For years men have used me for the same purpose, used me until I'm sickened with the darkness within. And now I add my own sins to those of others." She jerked her hands free from Laethan's grasp. Her hands looked skeletal, the skin almost translucent. "If someone asked you to kill me, I suspect you'd accept. And I'm not sure I would find any regret if this were to happen."

"No, that commission I would decline." The man's deep blue eyes shone with sincerity. "I think you will find your own atonement for that which you personally do. For what others have placed on you, you are innocent."

When the assassin left, Hepta found she missed his strangely calming influence. There was a simplicity about him that reminded her of her servants. But she absorbed what he had said, much as she absorbed the evil others brought her. She regretted that she would not be there to see Temmor's dead body. She wondered if Laethan would give her just this one memory, but suspected he would not. She must be satisfied with recalling the Acolyte's struggles and placing Temmor's face behind the eyes that looked sightlessly into the night sky.

In her twenty-forth year, Hepta came to the Well of Forgetting for the last time. Her cavalcade indicated such richness that the Acolytes stared at it in awe. Heavily laden camels and donkeys and horses stretched down the road for miles. As soon as the large and sumptuous tent was erected, a person no less than the Chief Acolyte presented himself at the door.

"What may we do to be of service?" he asked the muscular man with the guileless blue eyes who met him.

The blue-eyed man looked at the Chief Acolyte with loathing, but indicated a bed near the back of the tent. "My mistress has need of your cleansing."

To the Acolyte's eyes, the woman looked in need of immediate help if she were to be cleansed before she died. The figure on the bed was skeletal. Thin wisps of rust-colored hair fanned out on the pillow. "We can take her at the front of the line tomorrow morning," the Chief Acolyte said. "The fee will be twenty gold coins."

"My mistress will pay whatever you deem fair," the man answered. "I myself will carry her to the Well tomorrow."

And so, at first dawn, when the chasm that held the Well was still covered in shadow, Laethan carried Hepta to the Well of Forgetting. The Chief Acolyte and three others intoned the Prayer of Arrival. When they reached the Well itself, Laethan knelt and placed Hepta in a sitting position, his sturdy body supporting her from behind.

The Chief Acolyte placed his hands on the woman's head to begin the cleansing. He was surprised that the woman's attendant placed his hands over his own, or, at least he was until the corruption in the woman began to bubble out. Such foulness, such depravity, the Chief Acolyte had never before seen. He would have snatched his hands away had he been able to do so.

As it was, the putrid mass flowed out of the woman as if she were the very spring of darkness. The eyes of the Chief Acolyte rolled back in his head and he swooned, but the attendant held the Acolyte's hands tight against the woman's head and the loathsome ooze continued.

An overpowering stench roiled from the Well. A deep rumbling filled the air. The three other Acolytes fled as a gross accumulation of filth and debasement overflowed the Well's lip. And still the darkness poured forth. The slow moving, gelatinous, black mass followed the well-worn path leading down the chasm. Murder, rape, fraud, depravity—it all coagulated and flowed away from the Well in an oily tide. Other suppliants and their attendant Acolytes ran retching and screaming.

Finally, Hepta was drained. Laethan released the Chief Acolyte's hands and dispassionately watched him fall over into the tarry gunk that surrounded them. He picked up the unconscious Hepta and carried her back to her tent, gently protecting her from the chaos of the pilgrims' settlement.

"Clean this filth from your lady," he ordered the women in her tent. Then, like all those around him, he went out to organize his cavalcade for immediate departure.

Hepta came back to herself while riding on a white horse cradled against the body of a blue-eyed man. She looked around with new eyes. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"I am fulfilling the commission you gave me," he replied. "We and all your vast wealth are going to a mountain fastness I purchased in your name. There we will begin a lifetime of atonement."

"Is this good?"

"Very good," he said with a smile. "Together we will do much good."

The low mountain rises just before the Waste begins. It is heavily wooded and surrounded by a crumbling stone wall. It has long been called the Mount of Innocents. People for miles around tell of a time gone by when people would bring children who were slow of mind or infirm of limb to the gate in the wall. There, these limited children would be accepted with great rejoicing by a blue-eyed man and a woman whose beauty was like a flame. On the mountain these children would find their fullest potential surrounded by love and luxury.

This was, of course, long in the past. Nothing now remains but the name, the hill, the broken walls, and the trees.

There are also legends that whisper of a place called the Well of Forgetting, but its location is unknown. Those who have looked for it have found only haunted chasms and blowing sand. ☙

Stories by Meredith Simmons have appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction, Paradox,* various science fiction and fantasy anthologies, and some non-genre publications. Her first print sale won the grand prize in *Writers of the Future XVII.* In real life, she's a real estate broker, so she currently has a lot more time to write.

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Insanity has been defined as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting to have a different outcome. No wonder they say the gods are crazy.

by T. L. Morganfield

Illustration by Zelda Devon & Kurt Huggins

The Hearts of Men

"You're the Hummingbird of the South, aren't you?"

I looked up to see a black-haired boy crouched just outside my camp, his tired, brown features just visible in the firelight. Dirt streaked his cheeks and his smile was almost toothless. His clothes hung loose on him and his right big toe stuck out of a hole in the end of his stiff leather shoe.

"You're really him, aren't you?" the boy asked, shuffling a bit closer.

"Who?" I asked.

"Huitzilopochtli."

I considered a moment before answering, "Maybe." I really didn't know who I was; I wore six-shooters at my hips and my battered felt hat smelled of sweat and rot, but when I'd checked it for a name, I didn't find one. The boy was the first visitor I'd had since the "incident," though occasionally I spotted people watching me from the dusty windows of their houses at the edge of the one-street town.

"Huitzilopochtli," I repeated, working the word over my tongue. "It's as good a name as any, I guess."

The boy stepped closer and looked askance at the corpses lying around the firelight's boundary. He squinted at me, then declared, "Grandpapa was right. You are the Blue Hummingbird! Where did you come from?"

"From my mother, of course. Didn't you?"

"Not like you." He held his knees to his chest as he asked, "Are you going to kill me, like you did the others?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Have you come to kill me, like the others did?"

"Never!"

"Then you've nothing to fear," I said.

The boy relaxed, but fixated on my left hand, with which I held a bowie knife over the fire to roast a piece of meat. "You're hungry?" I held the meat out to him.

He wrinkled his nose. "Ugh, no."

"What's wrong with it?"

"He was the barber," the boy whispered. He peered at the dismembered body behind me. "He once took my money and knocked my front teeth out instead of cutting my hair, but I'd never eat him."

I shrugged and ate it myself. With so little else to eat, I couldn't afford to be finicky. That first day, consumed by a crazed hunger, I'd eaten all the men's hearts, but with only a dozen rotting corpses left now, I picked what I could from them. Sometimes I heard animals prowling beyond my firelight, hissing and growling, and they'd stolen a couple of the bodies, but they mostly hunted in town, bringing screams and gunshots in the deepest hours of night. I thought to hunt them for fresh meat, but whenever I went searching for them, they fled out into the desert. My hunger never abated no matter how much I ate, as if eating this dead flesh only stoked my hunger rather than quelling it.

"Why are you here?" the boy asked, rubbing out his grimy ear with his little finger.

A good question, and just like my real name, I had no answer for it. Everything that had happened prior to a few days ago was an impenetrable gray mist. My earliest memory wasn't a sight or a sound, but rather a feeling—a feeling that I was under attack….

A sudden rush of fear awakens me from my timeless slumber and instinct tells me to flee. I claw free of my fleshy prison, my fingernails slicing like eagle talons through tissue, then I fall upon the ground, dazed, wet, and panicked.

I gaze up at the man standing before me, his face stubbly and slack-jawed with astonishment. His gapped teeth are tobacco-yellowed and his eyes jaundiced. Beyond him stands more men—a dozen at least—all carrying pick-axes, shovels, or wooden clubs. The man in front of me holds only a rope, which stretches up over a tree branch above me.

The other end is looped around a woman's neck. She hangs directly above me, as if I'd dropped right out of her. Her eyes protrude from her purple face. And she's bitten off her tongue.

But that's not the worst of it. That dubious honor belongs to everything below her sagging breasts, where her tattered remains flutter in the hot breeze like a battle-worn flag.

The man holding the rope swears and drops the woman into a wet pile behind me. As if his curse were a war cry, the other men raise their weapons and charge me.

I don't remember reaching for my pistols, but their wooden grips are cool in both of my hands. Terror swarms over me like ants as I work the triggers and hammers, laying out one man after the other. Three, now five. Ten. The next one I only graze across the cheek. The next shot hits another man in the shoulder, making him drop his pitchfork but he's far from dead.

And my guns are empty.

I snatch a club from the ground. Four men remain—make that three, after I lay one's skull open with the splintery club. The smell of blood tames my fear. My lips curl, my mind blurs, and my stomach roars like a jaguar.

I take the remaining men down one after another, each with a single swing of my club. I have to hunt down the last one though. His good sense has won out, but he only takes a dozen steps before I lunge onto him. I steal his bowie knife and cut his heart out while he screams. All I care about though is the texture of the heart's flesh, the taste of the blood, the power of sacrifice running down my throat. I feel certain that if I eat enough hearts, everything I don't know will become clear to me….

I blinked away the memory, my heart pounding—no, not my heart; it was the boy's. I heard it plainly, knew its rhythm instinctively. I eyed him, feeling like a starving dog watching his master eat dinner. I'd been wrong about the hearts; nothing had become clearer, and if anything I was hungrier now than before.

The boy stared at my hand again and this time I followed his gaze, to see what drew his interest. It had to be the feathers. My fingers were covered in them, tiny turquoise ones—no doubt the source of him calling me the Blue Hummingbird. They stretched up my arm and down the entire left side of my body, to my ankle; they even crept up the side of my face, circling my left eye.

"This Huitzilopochtli you speak of," I asked. "What do you know of him?"

"My grandpapa told me of him, just as his grandfather told him. The Blue Hummingbird of the South was a hero of great renown among our ancestors. He led them out of servitude in Atzlan, into the Valley in Mexico where they built their empire long ago. Grandpapa says Huitzilopochtli's sister bewitched his four hundred brothers into slaying their mother, but Huitzilopochtli sprang from her womb fully armed and killed them all."

I glanced at the bodies scattered around me. "The resemblance is uncanny." I couldn't help thinking of my guns and my lack of youthful memories, and how my mother had hung in shreds from the tree, as if I'd torn my way free of her. I'd buried her, feeling like a warm ball of feathers when I touched her cold flesh, already missing the comforting sounds of her thrumming heartbeat all around me, the pulsing of the blood in her veins. I longed for them even now.

The boy moved closer again, within my reach now. His closeness stoked my hunger and my gaze slid to his sternum.

"Have you come to give us back the moon?"

I blinked at him. "The moon?"

He nodded. "The witch Coyolli took it away and now it's so dark at night that the star-demons hunt inside town. She's the one who sent the men to hang your mother."

"Why?"

"Mama said it was because your mother's belly swelled up and she wasn't married, and that disgraced her daughter—Coyolli—so Coyolli bewitched some townsmen to punish her."

"The witch is my sister?"

"She is, so you see, you must be the Blue Hummingbird, and you'll bring back the moon. You're here to make her give it back, aren't you?"

"I haven't any idea why I'm here," I admitted. "I *am* irritated that this Coyolli woman made me drop so unceremoniously out here in the first place." I rubbed my half-feathered chin. "And she lives in town?"

"She left two nights ago." The boy pointed south. "She's scared of you."

"But you're not?"

He grinned, showing off the unfortunate gap where his front teeth once were. "Why should I be afraid of our savior?"

I had the gnawing feeling that he had much to fear from me though. Still, I found myself unexpectedly liking the boy and his fearlessness. "If I'm to retrieve the moon and drive off your star-demons, I'll have to find the witch and make her give it back."

"I knew you'd help us." The boy clapped and sprang to his feet. "I'll come with you. My grandpapa will let us have at least one horse."

I almost told him I should go alone, but then I didn't know the land or where Coyolli might go. I needed a guide. "What's your name? I might not know my own, but I'd rather call you something other than 'boy.'"

"My mother baptized me Pedro, but my grandpapa calls me Timacoz," he said.

"It Will Be Given to You" seemed a strange name for a boy—though it struck me even stranger that I knew what it meant—but at least *he had a name*. "Which do you prefer?"

"For you… Timacoz is best."

"Then that's what I'll call you."

Timacoz took me into town, to a small, run-down shack at the southern outskirts, near the empty cattle fields. The hinges creaked and wobbled as he flung the door open, then ran inside. I started to follow but turned when I heard a woman screaming in the distance. I drew a gun and scanned the lamplit dirt street.

"Where have you been?" a tired, calico-dressed woman demanded when the boy ran into her arms. "You know you're not to be out after dark. Isn't it enough that I lost your father?" When she saw me looming outside the doorway, she crossed herself and muttered a prayer.

"It's really him, Mama," Timacoz said, pointing at me. "He's come to bring back the moon and save us from the star-demons."

She scrutinized me with fear yet conviction. "Does he speak the truth, or are you here to hurt what's left of my family?"

I ducked under the sagging doorway, making her back away. But Timacoz came to my side. "He's all right, Mama. See?"

"He's all right now, but what about when he gets hungry?" an old man asked from a rocking chair in the back corner. He rose on wobbling knees then came forward to look me over. "My grandfather told me about you, Méxtli."

"Méxtli?" I asked.

"You have many names, but that's the most important one, the one our ancestors the Méxica took their name from," he said. "Our old country was named for you too—even as far north as here, before the treaty that says we're now Americans. But I suppose you don't remember anything of that?"

I squinted, trying to draw up memories. "I remember feathers…and a woman's breasts."

The old man nodded. "That poor woman the townsmen hung, she told me she found you under the butcher's bench behind her house, just a bright ball of blue feathers. She tucked you between her breasts and she became with child, just like Cóatlicue did before her."

"Snake-Skirt?" The name reminded me of pulsing blood and warmth. It felt like a mother's name.

He cocked his head. "Then you remember?"

"No." I didn't like his calculating look.

"When's the last time you ate, Méxtli?"

"I'm not hungry," I said, but judging from his expression, he didn't believe me.

"Mama will pack food for us," Timacoz interrupted. "I told him you'd let us have a horse, Grandpapa."

"Oh no, you aren't going anywhere, Pedro," Mama stepped in.

"But I have to go with him. He doesn't know where Coyolli went—"

"He'll have to find her on his own, for you're staying right here."

Timacoz started arguing again but his grandfather held up a hand. He gazed at me a moment before announcing, "It's Timacoz's choice, Maria. He's the man of the house now, and he's old enough to decide if he wants to serve the gods."

"This isn't about serving any gods—" she started, but he waved her silent.

"Are you willing to make the necessary sacrifice?" the old man asked Timacoz.

"Of course!" Timacoz said. "Someone must stop the star-demons, and you said only the Blue Hummingbird could stop Coyolli—"

"His name is Méxtli," Grandpapa reprimanded him. "Show respect, Timacoz." He looked from the boy to me then back again. "You may take one horse, and be sure to pack plenty of food."

Timacoz ran into the back room, his mother following him.

"He doesn't know what you ask of him," Grandpapa said.

"I ask him only to guide me—"

"He isn't here to guide you. He has a special gift, and he'll use it on your behalf. Or will you be like your old self and take it from him instead? Tell me, Méxtli, what will you do when the hunger becomes too much to bear?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You will, when the time comes. Just remember, you can't do this without him, and you'll only get what you earn."

His warning puzzled me but I was eager for the conversation to end. "I'll keep that in mind."

"I hate sending him off like this, but someone must do something about the Tzizimime," he continued. "The sunlight drives them away, but the days are getting shorter now. We need the moon back."

I knew that strange word too: Tzizimime, "The Monsters Dęscending from Above," and hearing their name made me rest my hands on my pistol grips. "I'll bring back your moon," I promised.

At dawn, I loaded fresh ammunition into my revolver and pocketed the extra balls and powder Timacoz's grandfather gave me. "No *macuahuitl?"* he noted as he watched me. The word brought me images of obsidian blades embedded in slender wooden clubs, wielded by men dressed in jaguar skins, their bodies painted for war. "Well, maybe you will be a different Méxtli after all," Grandpapa said, then he let me be.

Before Timacoz and I mounted up, I scraped my new name into the oily leather sweatband of my hat, so I wouldn't forget it. It felt like a good name, one I'd like to hold onto.

We headed south, toward the mountains where Timacoz said the witch Coyolli sometimes went to practice her black magic and worship her dark gods. Around noon, we crossed a dried-up creek and went down into a ravine, hoping to find shade for lunch. That was where we found the cattle.

Twenty of the animals lay out in the rabbit brush, their stiff hind legs jutting up into the air at severe angles. Flies swarmed everywhere. Timacoz started reining the horse away but I slid off, to get a closer look.

"Demon's work," Timacoz said, remaining up on the saddle. "They usually go after livestock; chickens, horses, especially goats. They like goats so much that we don't have any left in town. Some call the star-demons 'goat-suckers' because they drink their blood. Grandpapa calls them the Tzizimime and says they come from the stars. He saw the one that dragged Papa off in the middle of the night. I saw one once too, watching me through my bedroom window."

"What did it look like?"

"Like a dog, but with spines on its back, and glowing red eyes. It didn't run like a dog either; it jumped off on its hind legs, like the hopping mice that get into Mama's flour bags."

I knelt to examine the bite marks on a steer's neck. The pungent smell made my stomach rumble. "I'm hungry."

"We can't stop here. It's bad luck to stay near a star-demon's kill. Let's go farther up the trail."

We stopped for lunch under a rock overhang. We ate beans and tortillas Timacoz's mother had packed for us, but I felt as if I were eating air. My stomach gurgled incessantly and I kept thinking about how I'd torn the hearts out of those men I'd killed, and the pleasurable, almost drunken haze that devouring them had brought over me. The cattle were out of sight but I still smelled their enticing rot on the hot wind.

"Stay here," I told Timacoz, then started back up the trail.

"Where are you going?"

"Just stay here. I'll be back shortly."

I ate the hearts of all twenty cattle, but to my frustration, my hunger was insatiate. It had worked with the men, so why not now? I thought of the old man's warnings and when Timacoz rode up, my gaze immediately went to his chest.

The world falls silent around me save for one constant, demanding sound: the thudding of the boy's heart. The sound makes me salivate. I have a knife—it's still in my hand and I'm flexing my fingers on it like a cat adjusting its hold on a dead mouse. He can't possibly fight me off; I'm much too big, much too strong for him. I'm used to taking what I want, taking what I need, by force and fear if necessary—

"What are you doing?" Timacoz asked, breaking my trance.

I turned away. "Nothing."

"Were you eating the cows, like you were eating the barber?"

I wiped my hands on my pants but the blood had already dried in the desert heat. "We should keep going."

"Is something wrong?"

"No." But I couldn't meet his gaze. The grandfather's warnings made eerie sense now and I felt both ashamed and disturbed. How long would it be before the hunger got the better of me and I'd kill Timacoz and eat his heart?

We made camp before nightfall. "The star-demons avoid light, so a good fire should keep us safe," Timacoz said, so I gathered enough wood to keep a fire going through the night. After dinner, he fell asleep.

I didn't eat anything—obviously food did nothing for my hunger—and after hours of watching the fire, I couldn't sleep either. I didn't recall ever having slept, though I hadn't thought about it until seeing Timacoz drooling out the side of his mouth while he snored. Feeling the hunger building again, I rolled onto my back and stared up at the stars, so many of them even I couldn't count them.

Even I? I thought. *What's that supposed to mean?* The truth about my past felt so close now, as if it teetered upon a string, and if I thought hard enough it would tumble back to me, and the bits and flashes of my life would finally make sense.

"Trying to remember, brother?"

I glanced across the fire to see a woman sitting opposite me. She was slim but firm, with muscular arms. She wore a calico dress like the one Timacoz's mother had worn, but many tiny gold bells dangled from her ears and a pendant of mirror-like obsidian hung around her neck.

She was always so vain, I thought. *Always admiring herself in that mirror.* "Coyolxauhqui," I suddenly remembered. I sat up and rested a hand on my left revolver.

Coyolli smirked. "So you *are* starting to remember." She turned her attention to Timacoz. "And who's this? Your meal?"

I hated how she eyed him. "He's my guide," I snapped.

She laughed. "Look at you, bristling like a wolf at his kill. Don't worry, I won't steal your dinner from you."

"He's not a meal."

"Is that a hint of protectiveness I hear, brother?" Coyolli asked. "Surely you don't care for him? It's not in your nature to care about humans; that's the realm of another, weaker god. The Hummingbird of the South cares only what humans can give him, how strong they can make him with their sacrifices. You feel the hunger, don't you, brother?"

I drew my gun and pointed it at her. "Give me the moon, sister."

"It's rude to change subjects. We're talking about you, not me. Does he know you're going to rip his heart out and eat it?"

I swallowed back the strange, guilty pain rising in my chest. "Give me the moon." I cocked the revolver's hammer.

"The moon's gone, brother. I ate it; it tasted like spicy tamales." Coyolli rubbed her belly. "And if you're not careful, I'll eat the sun too, and you'll wither away and die. Then what will you do?"

I fired but she dodged and laughed at me. She crouched behind Timacoz, her fingers curled over his shoulder like fat spider-legs. He laid awake now, his eyes wide and fearful. "You've gotten slower, brother," she hissed through red-dyed teeth. "Last time you killed me seconds after you were born, but now you're slow and dumb, and I'll be the winner this time."

I fired again, shattering the gold bells on her left ear. Now she glared at me. I pulled the trigger again, and her necklace fell off and struck Timacoz on the temple, drawing blood. He howled and hid his face.

"Which of us is the slower one now, sister?" I asked.

Coyolli sneered. "It isn't a question of who's fastest. It's how will you escape the Tzizimime?" She blew a kiss at the fire and it snuffed out as if she'd poured a bucket of water on it.

I leaped at her but when I reached Timacoz, she was gone. The darkness stank of sulfur, and hisses and growls rose around us like a gathering thunderstorm. When hundreds of burning-red eyes began pressing closer, Timacoz clutched my leg. Our horse tried to run but I heard it go down with a muffled scream and tearing flesh.

I drew my second gun and pointed both into the dark. "It will be all right. Just stay by me and everything will be fine." I hoped Timacoz couldn't hear the doubt in my trembling voice. The boy's tears soaked through my pant leg, making my feathers itch.

Hearing something scramble at me from the left, I set the dark ablaze with gunfire, giving me a split-second glimpse of the star-demon's hairless, doglike snout and long, bared fangs. Behind its ears, thick quills stood upright. I shot it in the face at close-range and batted away its lifeless body when it slammed into me. Timacoz screamed and wrapped both arms around my legs, trying to hide behind me. I shot at random into the dark. Shrieks and yips were the only evidence I was hitting anything.

When both guns clicked empty, I cursed and dug into my coat pocket for my extra ammunition, though without the firelight I doubted I could see well enough to load the powder. A star-demon sunk its needle-like fangs into my neck and knocked me to the ground, scattering my guns and bullets. When the beast sucked in, my skull felt ready to explode.

"Méxtli! Help me!" Timacoz hollered, his voice growing distant. Was a star-demon dragging him off, or was I about to lose consciousness?

I fumbled a hand around in the dirt, hoping to find one of my guns, but instead I felt Coyolxauhqui's necklace. I clubbed the star-demon over the head with the sharpest edge of the mirror, trying to break its suction on me. In turn it gripped me tighter with its talon-like claws. I didn't want to think about what might happen to Timacoz if I couldn't get free….

With one last bash, the mirror cracked, releasing a streak of blinding white light. The star-demon shrieked, then burst into ash all over me. I inhaled the cinders and then coughed, my lungs burning and eyes watering. When I stumbled to my feet, another star-demon clamped onto my ankle, its teeth sinking through the leather to the bone. I went down hard with a howl and the mirror flew from my hand and shattered across the ground.

I shielded my eyes, expecting torturous light and heat that would reduce me to ash too, but when I finally lowered my hands, white moonlight washed over the silent desert. I checked the sky, but there still was no moon. The glow came instead from chunks of rock scattered among the shards of the broken obsidian mirror. My stomach sank.

I'd broken the moon.

I struggled to my feet, my ankle stinging and my foot squishing in my blood-filled boot. I found Timacoz at the bottom of a nearby ravine, clutching his own bleeding ankle, but thankful he seemed otherwise unharmed. I scooped him into my arms and carried him back to camp.

"They hurt you bad," he noted while I wrapped his ankle with some cloth. "Your neck—"

"I'll be fine." My hunger, antagonized by the smell of Timacoz's blood, came back stronger than ever, so I turned to rekindling the fire once I'd tied the bandage.

Timacoz searched the sky. "You got the moon back?"

"Not exactly. Coyolli had it in her necklace, and I broke it."

"Is that what all these rocks are?"

I nodded and sighed. "I failed."

"Maybe not." Timacoz stared at the fire a moment, hesitating a breath before saying, "In some of the stories, after the Blue Hummingbird slew his four hundred brothers, he then killed his sister—the one who turned their brothers against their mother—and he cut her head off and threw it into the sky, to make the moon."

"Then hope isn't lost."

"No." He lay down and pulled his blanket up to his chin. I'd never seen him so unhappy.

I was glad he was safe though, a notion that felt completely alien to me, as if I wasn't supposed to feel like that. I thought back on what Coyolxauhqui had said.

"Did she speak the truth?" Timacoz suddenly asked.

"About what?"

"That you're going to tear my heart out and eat it, like you did to those men and the cattle?" His voice quaked.

A ravenous "Yes!" itched to jump off my lips, but I held it back. "No." *Yes!* I shook my head and repeated, "No, absolutely not."

Oh but you will!

When I started muttering "no, no, no" under my breath, Timacoz asked, "Are you all right?"

I laughed. "I'm not, but I promise you this—" *I will rip your still-beating heart from your chest and shred it with my teeth!* "—I will not do that." I lay on my side, my back to the fire, to Timacoz, hoping to calm my crazed hunger enough to make it through the night.

I managed to forget my stomach for a while by counting the bits of moon rock scattered about, watching their light grow steadily dimmer, but by morning the hunger burned like a wildfire. I was weak from loss of blood, but I made myself press on when we broke camp. My throat was parched, but water gave it no relief. I felt feverish in the intense heat, and the world swayed like a ship under my feet. I could hardly stand. If only I could find something to appease my hunger, just for a little while….

I don't know why I didn't see them before, but the ground around me is littered with hearts; hundreds, thousands, millions of them! All glistening wet with precious blood. I cry for joy at the sight of them. I rake them up with my hands and laugh like a gleeful child. At last! I bite into one, eagerly anticipating the metallic tang of sweet blood and the power it embodies…

But I can't bite down. The tissue refuses to give under my teeth. When I try to saw sideways on it, my skull rattles and I taste only dirt. I spit the foulness from my mouth. It's a rock, not a heart! What kind of dark magic is this? It's the boy's fault; he put these here to torment me, to taunt me. I'll make him pay for that, stick my knife into his guts and twist it until he begs me to end the pain for him. And I will, if you *will only let me look at him—*

I dropped the stone and ran my fingers through my greasy hair, trying to calm myself.

Timacoz kept his distance but said, "You're not doing well, are you? Should we stop?"

I wiped a stray tear from my eye. "We have to keep going."

But we only traveled an hour before the madness returned. *You can't hide him from me, Méxtli; maybe you won't let me see him, but I can hear him; his persistent, thudding heartbeat, his pulsing blood. It's loud as those blasted cannons the Spanish used to torment our humans; its sound fills the yellow skies and you can't escape it. All we have to do is take our knife—*

Seeing my bowie knife in my hand, I threw it off into the desert. Anger welled up inside me, demanding I go fetch the blade, but instead I collapsed into the dirt, refusing to give in.

Timacoz backed away from me, the panic plain on his face. "Look! There's a farmhouse. I'll go get help." He pointed behind him but I didn't bother to look. I just closed my eyes and begged the mania to go away.

When I finally calmed again, I opened my eyes to see Timacoz peering down at me. "Nobody's there, but it seems abandoned. I think we should stay there tonight." He put my arm around his neck and tried to lift me. "You need to get into bed. I think that star-demon that bit you was rabid—"

I shoved him away though, the very feel of his blood-heated skin giving me tremors. "Don't touch me! You can't touch me or I'll…I might…I'm too heavy for you to carry." Panting, I stumbled away from him, toward the farmhouse. He followed me at a cautious distance.

I couldn't trust myself to stay in the house with Timacoz though. *Ha, fool! He's not safe from us anywhere!* When we reached the fence at the edge of the yard, I pointed to the barn behind the house. "I'm going there, Timacoz. You stay in the house, and don't come looking for me."

"But what if the star-demons come back?" Timacoz asked.

I handed him one of my revolvers. "Just stay in the house."

"But what about you? They could easily break through that barn door…you could die out there."

"Then so be it." I headed for the barn.

But he grabbed my sleeve. "Please don't! I'll come with you—"

"You can't!" I yanked my arm from him.

"Please!"

"Don't you understand? I will kill you!"

"You won't!"

"I've already thought about it; it's all I think about anymore. I can't take the chance that I'll actually do it." I leaned against the weather-rotted fence post to keep myself from falling over into the dust. *You think you can stop me but you can't, Méxtli!* My insatiable hunger roared but I refused to listen. I wouldn't let it rule me. "Now go into the house and stay there, and no matter what, don't come see me," I told Timacoz. "And if I try to come to you…shoot me."

Timacoz gaped at me, his face paled.

"I'm sorry. I never should have brought you with me. If I'd known it would be like this, I'd have insisted you stayed home." I then stumbled across the yard to the barn, falling once but making myself get back up. I closed the barn door behind me, then collapsed in the hay in the farthest stall.

I lay semiconscious, the hunger slowly turning from angry indignation to whiny begging, but I never answered it. Instead I focused on the disconnected memories and stories the voice fed me as it tried to convince me of who I was, and who I should be again.

We chopped that bitch Coyolxauhqui into hundreds of pieces and threw them down the mountain, remember? She tried to kill us, just like now, but we made her and the others pay for their betrayal. And there was Tollan, remember? How we and Tezcatlipoca taught that

sniveling Quetzalcóatl exactly what we thought of his blasphemous outlawing of human sacrifice? We tortured his people with plagues and made them dance off cliffs with our magic flute. We made them turn against him, made them respect and fear our wrath, just as it should be. Do you remember sitting in the temple in Tenochtitlán, how the humans fed us so many hearts that we were drunk with ecstasy?

I remembered it all now. I remembered the hideous stench of the dark temples and caring about nothing but the next sacrifice, the next warrior's heart the priests would feed me, the hearts of men taken by force to buy my favor, to keep me glutted and happy on the blood and tissues of millions, in the futile hope I'd protect them from the end they so feared; an end that, in my lazy complacency, I didn't even attempt to stop when it finally came.

I also remembered how, when the blood tribute ceased, I'd withered slowly away to nothing more than a curiosity, almost completely forgotten. Just like I was withering away now. "Good riddance," I muttered. Why did I come back at all? What use did mankind have for a selfish, bloodthirsty god? I hated who I was. The world was better off without me, so I resolved to lie there and let my own hunger devour me from the inside as it had before. It was the only fitting end for me.

But then Timacoz disobeyed me.

He came into the barn after nightfall, carrying a lantern and Coyolxauhqui's necklace. He knelt next to me and laid the broken jewelry across my neck. "Here, maybe it still has some magic that can help you."

"Nothing can help me," I mumbled.

"That's not true." He swallowed hard. "There's one way to save you, for sure."

"I'm not worth saving," I said and turned from him.

"Of course you are. You're the Blue Hummingbird, the one who will bring back the moon, who'll free us of the witch Coyolli and save us from the star-demons. Grandpapa says we need you now just like our ancestors needed you long ago, to lead them out of Atzlan. He says Mexico has given us up but the Americans don't want us, and we need you now to lead us again." Timacoz wiped his tears away and sat taller. "You're as brave as my father, and to say you don't deserve saving is the same as saying he didn't either. Or that none of us do."

"You and your father didn't devour the hearts of millions of people," I replied.

"But you didn't leave me to the star-demons, did you? You saved me from them. And now you're trying to save me from yourself. That's why you're worth saving, Méxtli, and that's why I'm going to give you what you need."

I squeezed my eyes shut. "You don't know what you're saying."

"I do." Timacoz put a kitchen knife in my hand.

"You will die."

"I know." He took his shirt off. "But without the moon, the star-demons will just keep coming back and eventually no one will be left. Only you can bring back the moon. What's my life compared to everyone else's?"

I sat up, humbled in a way I'd never anticipated. "And to think I mistook you for a mere boy, Timacoz." I cast my gaze from the knife to him. "I don't ask you to do this."

"I know, but I offer it." Timacoz puffed his chest out, trying to appear unafraid though his fear was palpable. "Just promise me you'll make it worth something."

I wanted to look away from his face when I did it, but I made myself hold his gaze, so I might forever remember the fear and uncertainty in his eyes, so I'd always remember that my gifts came with high costs.

I didn't eat Timacoz's heart. Instead I held it in my hands and just stared at it for a long time. It was so small—certainly not enough to appease the aching hunger of a gluttonous god—but in fact just holding it ended the hunger. For the first time in my life, this one or the last, the voice was silent.

That's the power of the sacrifice he made, I thought. That's why it deserved more respect than just shoving it in my mouth and devouring it like I had every other heart.

I took my sister's necklace and attached the precious gift to the middle of it, inside a cage I made of bailing wire. As soon as I hung it around my neck, my strength grew. I washed my hands in the rain barrel outside and gazed into the darkness. The star-demons hissed and shrieked, daring me to venture out into the moonless night, but when I pulled my six-shooters and cocked them, the star-demons yelped and scampered away. They at least knew better than to cross me now.

I struck out into the dark, ready to honor my promise.

I headed for the southern mountains, for, like most gods, Coyolxauhqui was drawn toward the cycles of destiny, doomed to repeat them over and over again, just as I had been, until I'd noticed the loose string in destiny's skirt. If my sister wished to continue along the same path as always, I'd oblige her. I'd meet her atop the mountain and we'd play out our divine dance.

I climbed the windy pass, to the top of the tallest mountain, where I found her sitting in a cave, burning sacred copal incense in a fire. "And here we are again, brother," Coyolxauhqui said as she approached me. "In the cave of the very same mountain as before. And my, where's your little friend?" She flashed her red grin at me. "I said you wouldn't be able to resist. And I see you've brought back my necklace…." But when she saw the mirror missing, replaced by the caged, still-beating heart, she paused. "What have you done, brother? Where's the moon?" She reached out to touch the heart.

But I grabbed her wrist. "I've come to make a new one, from your head."

Coyolxauhqui laughed. "Of course we want to make a new one. Without the humans, where will you get your precious hearts?"

"That's not why." I tightened my grip on her, then pulled one of my side arms, to hold to her throat. But my hand found not a gun but a *macuahuitl*. Seeing the obsidian-edged sword against her throat startled me a moment, but what difference did it make? A weapon was a weapon.

She smiled at me. "Go ahead, brother. Kill me."

I stared at her, confused. "You're not afraid?"

"Of immortality? Of course not. It's why we're here now. When I discovered that our mother had found your ball of feathers, I sent the townsmen to slay her because I knew it would set us on the path to here, that you'd eventually catch me and cut my head off, to throw into the sky to make the moon, to ingrain my name in the minds of humanity once again. Who doesn't want to be immortal, brother? Such love humanity bestowed upon us—"

"That was fear, not love," I said.

"The difference is negligible."

I knew better than to buy that line of reason this time, not with Timacoz's heart hanging around my neck, its powerful magic quenching my thirst and hunger like even a billion hearts hadn't managed to in all those centuries in the temple. For so long I'd been on the constant brink of starvation, each heart making me still hungrier, demanding more and more with each year.

But with one meaningful sacrifice, I'd never again feel the burning hunger. And this wasn't a gift born of fear. I was different now, and I refused to cling to those accursed cycles of destiny.

I shoved her and she landed on the rock floor with a grunt. "No one will remember your name, Coyolxauhqui. You don't deserve that honor."

Coyolxauhqui bared her teeth, then leaped at me, targeting my eyes with her fingernails. My left-side vision went black with an agonizing pop and I roared, the pain throwing kindling on my fury. Coyolxauhqui clung to me like a leech, her gold bells jingling as I pulverized her sides over and over with my fists, but when she buried a blade in my ribs, I rammed her into the cave wall in front of me. Her bones snapped and she gagged and finally slid off me. I brought my sword around and took off her upraised arm at the elbow, shattering half the blade on one side of my sword. I flipped it instinctively in my hand and prepared to bring it around again, to take her head off.

But I stopped mid-swing when I saw the bracelets of feathers dangling from my wrists. I no longer wore my dingy overcoat and dusty pants; I wore a loincloth and jewelry of bone and feathers. My body was painted for the Flowery War, and Timacoz's heart…I gasped when I saw it struggling to beat as it began turning to obsidian.

Coyolxauhqui laughed. "You're almost there, brother, so stop standing there like an idiot and do what destiny says you must."

I flicked my gaze to the sword again, to the scene carved into the wood's flat surface: war prisoners with their limbs cleaved being led by warriors, going to the temple to sacrifice their prisoners to me. The Jaguar Warriors held their *macuahuitls* high in triumph, the sacred weapon of the Flowery War, most prized because it maimed without killing, making it easy to drag a victim off to the sacrifice.

What was I doing?

I dropped the sword, mortified by how I'd so nearly wasted Timacoz's sacrifice. It burst into dust on the stone floor.

When Coyolxauhqui spoke next, her laughter had turned to pleading. "Hack me into little pieces and throw me off the mountain! Toss my head into the sky to make the moon! Make me immortal again!" She grappled my arm with her one remaining hand and jerked me toward her.

I stared at my battered and bleeding sister with pity and pulled away from her. I yanked the blade from my side and cringed. No blood came out this time, only shimmering, golden stardust, and when I clamped my hand over the wound, it healed instantly. My vision came back as my eye reformed and all my aches and pains evaporated. My coat and pants returned, and when I looked down at Timacoz's heart, it beat strong and shone red and real again.

And in my chest I felt something odd that hadn't been there before: a rhythmic thudding of what could only be a heart, keeping time with Timacoz's. I set my hand over it, overwhelmed by the power of the boy's sacrifice and what he'd given me.

"You owe me immortality, brother," Coyolxauhqui wheezed. "Now give it to me!"

I knelt before her and set my hand on her laboring chest. I healed all her injuries—even regrew her arm—bringing her as much calm and comfort as I could, but what I had to say next would shatter whatever contentment I'd given her. "I'm sorry, sister, but nothing you say or do will convince me to make you immortal. That's an honor one must earn, not demand."

She slapped me but my rage was spent. I strode from the cave into the night, and she ran after me, but when the star-demons began climbing down the rocks around the cave mouth, hissing and shrieking, she backed up into the firelight again. "Give me my necklace, Méxtli! Without my necklace, I can't control them. And the fire…I don't have enough wood to keep it going all night!" When the star-demons crowded the cave entrance, she screamed and fled to the back where she huddled on the ground against the wall.

Timacoz wouldn't want me to leave her there like this, to be torn apart by the star-demons when the fire finally died. He would have shown her mercy, and so too would I. With a mere thought, I left a woodpile in the corner for her, for once using my divine powers for a merciful cause. It made me feel good. Now I had my own heart and it was comforting to know that I'd never again need anyone else's.

There was still no moon, but I had a plan.

I left the mountains for the desert, heading back to the farmhouse, and when dawn began easing up the horizon, I took off the caged heart. It pumped stronger than ever, keeping time with my own heart. Such a precious gift, deserving of greatness….

I stopped at the cattle fence along the edge of the property and leaned against it to watch the sun rise above the dust and rabbit brush, spreading yellow light across the land. I felt as if I were watching the dawning of the New Sun, something I'd missed so long ago because, back then, I'd been a god who knew nothing of self-sacrifice, and only an act of self-sacrifice could make a New Sun or Moon rise. But Timacoz had changed that all for me, and now I'd see the dawning of a New Moon.

"For your sacrifice, you deserve to be remembered, Timacoz," I said. "For that's truly the stuff gods are made of." I cut my palm on the barbed wired and bled my divine stardust over the heart, then I threw it into the sky where it burst into the New Moon. It showed pale in the early sunshine, but it would ensure the world never fell again into complete darkness. He'd shine down hope in the night and keep the Tzizimime from destroying everyone and everything. The Old Moon had been a cowardly, self-absorbed god, but this New Moon shared none of those qualities, and I intended to follow Timacoz's example. I would be a source of hope, not fear. And I'd always gaze into the night sky and remember how he'd saved me from myself, how he'd shown me peace at last, and perhaps given everyone hope for the same.

For if he could change the heart of this bloodthirsty god, anything was possible. ☙

T. L. Morganfield lives with her husband and two children in Colorado, where she attended Metropolitan State College of Denver and discovered a love for all things Aztec while studying for a BA in History (she also has a BA in English). She attended Clarion West in 2002 and her short fiction has since appeared in magazines such as *GUD, Shock Totem,* and *Paradox*. For more information on her work or to read her blog, go to http://www.tlmorganfield.com.

M Roland
2009

FALLEN

BY BRUCE HOLLAND ROGERS
ILLUSTRATION BY MARK ROLAND AND ALAN M. CLARK

Some people seem to have more than their fair share of good luck. Maybe they're blessed. Or maybe they're willing to do just about anything for it.

Everyone has a pet theory about the falling angels. They are a sign of the end of the world. They are a massive hoax, a conspiracy of the United Nations, the first step in an alien invasion. A pretty impressive hoax that would be, building lifelike angels sixty feet tall and dropping them from the sky at odd intervals all across the globe.

The official government line, from our own government, anyway, is that the angels seem to be sleeping and that sooner or later they will wake, so we had better take good care of them in the meantime. That's why most sites where an angel has thudded down are soon swarming with soldiers or marines, are soon surrounded with coils of razor wire and maybe a tank or two. And maybe the angels are only sleeping. It would be a very sound sleep. The angels don't breathe. But they don't rot, either.

Me, I have my own theory. It's one that I share with fellow smoke jumpers. Even though we never thought about it before the angels started falling, it turns out that we have a special relationship with them. Wherever an angel drops out of the sky, a fire starts. At the ignition point, it's not an ordinary fire. The nearest clump of vegetation to a fallen angel will burst into flame whether it's a tree, a bush, or a clump of grass. I've heard that in the desert where there's not much plant life, the lichen on a boulder started to burn. It must have looked as if the rock itself were on fire.

That initial fire burns without consuming. Through the flames, you can see the bush or tree, all its leaves or needles as fresh and green as ever. But the radiant heat is real enough to ignite other materials. When conditions are right, the fire will spread. Whenever an angel falls in some out-of-the-way patch of national forest or BLM land, then it's us, the smoke jumpers, who get the call to corral the flames.

My theory—maybe I should say our theory, the theory of my crew—is one born of experience. What we do is dangerous, and I don't mean the whole business of jumping out of an airplane. Sure, there are hazards to parachuting. Sometimes, sure enough, a canopy doesn't open right, but that's rarer than people imagine and generally happens only if the rigger was careless. Sometimes, it's true, uneven, rocky terrain makes for a spine-rattling landing. Sometimes, admittedly, there's no way to avoid coming down in a tree. But all of that, we can manage. The real danger is when we're on the ground, making decisions about how to deny fuel to the fire, reading the wind and the terrain. If you're unlucky, a wind that has blown predictably for days will turn at the worst possible moment.

Even there, we have our techniques. We're survivors.

Or we were until the angels started falling.

Last summer on one crew, we lost four guys. Reyes and Abeyta were forced into a box canyon without time to clear ground for a fire shelter. Danny Begay had both parachutes fail. Main and reserve, neither one opened. That just doesn't happen. And a freakish wind steered Candy Smith right into a hot spot.

All of those things might happen over the course of twenty years, spread out across every Forest Service crew. But this was all in one fire season, on one crew. With other crews, it was the same. Last year wasn't a bad year. It was a nightmare.

The same thing was happening everywhere, to everyone. More plane crashes. The big earthquakes, the ones bound to happen eventually, started coming one after another in L.A., San Francisco, Tokyo, Lisbon ...Typhoons hit cities. Tornadoes took the unluckiest path you could imagine.

"It's the angels," said Ron Teller. "They're not there to protect us anymore."

There's a story that I've heard about a fishing village in the Pacific. An angel fell right into their village, setting a palm tree

and some houses ablaze. Once the fire was under control, the elders met to decide what to do about the angel. They were a practical people. Whatever the angel was, it wasn't human. It couldn't be a sin to take advantage of the fact that it was fresh. They still had the ancient tools that their ancestors had used to butcher whales.

There are various versions of the story. Whenever the men took their boats out after that, they brought home a record catch. A ship wrecked twenty miles away, and a treasure of shipping containers washed up on the shore of the village, bringing a cornucopia of salvage. One of the village men went to Macau, walked into the casino a poor man, and walked out wealthy after rolling nothing but naturals until the table was closed down.

You won't find any version of this story in the mainstream news, not even to say it isn't true. It makes you wonder about the angels that have been lifted with cranes, ferried on giant flatbeds to where no one can see them. It makes you wonder about the reports that some of the burning bushes or trees, once abandoned by their angels, have gone out.

If angel flesh is lucky, there's only so much to go around. If the rich and powerful were keeping it for themselves, they'd want to keep their operations secret.

All this is on my mind when Pete Perry calls me up. He flies for the Forest Service summers, but he does other commercial flying, too, especially now, in the winter. He says he was flying cargo under the ceiling over Mineral County and saw a crash site from the air. I know exactly what he means by that. "Maybe you'd like to have a look up close," he says, "for a share."

THE OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT LINE, FROM OUR OWN GOVERNMENT, ANYWAY, IS THAT THE ANGELS SEEM TO BE SLEEPING AND THAT SOONER OR LATER THEY WILL WAKE, SO WE HAD BETTER TAKE GOOD CARE OF THEM IN THE MEANTIME.

We have to work fast. Once the clouds break up, satellites will see the angel, and we'll miss our chance. By the time I'm ready, the sun is down. Perry takes me up, alone, and I'm carrying as much weight in winter gear as I usually carry to a fire. Perry can take me to the angel, but I'll have to make my own way out. I'm packing snowshoes, a winter bag, and tent.

The angel is beautiful from the air, his face lit by the burning fir. Soft features. A sleeping baby.

"Take me up," I say, signaling with my hands. "I need lots of air."

"No. Any higher, you'll be jumping into cloud."

"More air," I insist. I repeat myself until he pulls the yoke. We circle and climb. I keep asking for more elevation. I don't expect things to go well.

Above us, a bright moon shines.

Sure enough, when I bail out and try to deploy, my main chute comes out like a tangle of laundry rippling in the wind. I cut free and pull my reserve. It opens. I have a good canopy just before I reach the clouds. I'm blind. Then I see. My target is easy to spot thanks to the fire.

Wind starts up and blows me off course. I try to correct, but it's like the wind that blew Smith right into the flames. I adjust my path, and the wind shifts to counter my adjustment. I adjust again, and so does the wind. I'm drifting away from the angel. Then, near the ground, things get dark like they always do in a night descent. Ambient light is enough to see large features, but up close, it's as if the sky had a dimmer switch. For seconds, I'm almost blind.

I land on the wrong side of a ridge with a crunch and clatter of scree, loose rock ringing like shards of pottery under my boots. I bang my knee against a rock I didn't see. Wind takes the canopy, pulls me toward what I fear is a drop off. I can't release. I'm trying to get free of the canopy, and I can't. I start pulling at every strap, loosening anything that might be holding me up. I end up freeing my pack, and it sleds down the scree and over an edge.

Then I punch the release again, and I'm free.

My knee throbs. I don't even go to the edge to see if I can spot the pack. It's gone. Bad luck.

I start the long hike back toward the ridge, the loose rock slipping half a step down for every step I take up. I do make it to the top, though, and rest a moment to contemplate the angel, pure and undisturbed in the snow. Or so he seems at a distance. When I'm closer, I find the single set of boot prints, the patch of darkened snow, the hole the size of a beef roast in the angel's thigh.

That at least solves the question of where to carve. Someone else has got it started for me.

I cut. I wrap the warm, wet gobbet in a plastic rescue blanket, even though it's the last bit of shelter or warmth besides my clothes. Then I cut a much smaller piece from the angel, break a suitable branch from a tree, and stand near the heat of the unconsuming fire, roasting. I take my time, cooking the meat through and through. Then I eat. Each bite is so tender, I hardly have to chew at all. I would not call the taste heavenly, however. Not that it's bad, but it's nothing extraordinary. Angel flesh tastes pretty much like pork.

When I am finished, I clean my hands with snow.

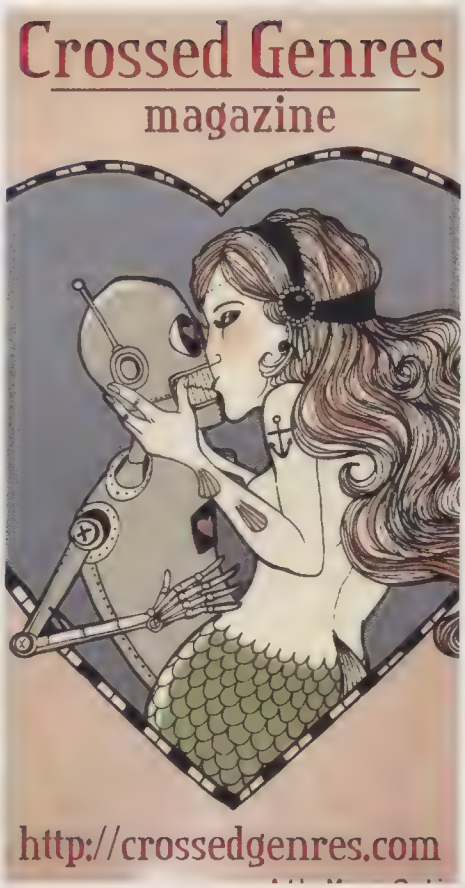
I feel compelled to speak out loud. I say, "I'm not greedy. I'm not heading for a casino or anything. I just want to do my job and not die." I look at the angel. At his face. I must say, the face that looked so peaceful from above looks sinister now.

When I have hiked out, I'll give Pete Perry his share. Some goes to the rest of my crew, and if there's more than that, I'll just have to decide who needs it most.

My knee has stiffened up. It's going to be a painful hike out, and tricky. I don't have snowshoes, a bag, or a tent. Ahead are avalanche zones to traverse. It's already cold, and the temperature is dropping. Crossing wild terrain at this time of year is dangerous even with the best equipment.

But I feel lucky. ∞

Bruce Holland Rogers lives temporarily in Budapest, Hungary, where he is teaching creative writing and American studies at Eotvos Lorand University on a Fulbright grant. He can be found on the web at www.shortshortshort.com



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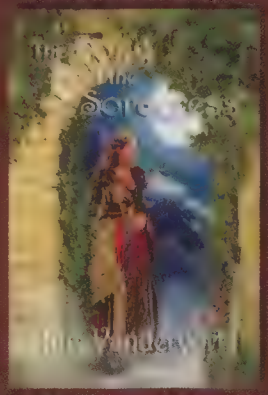

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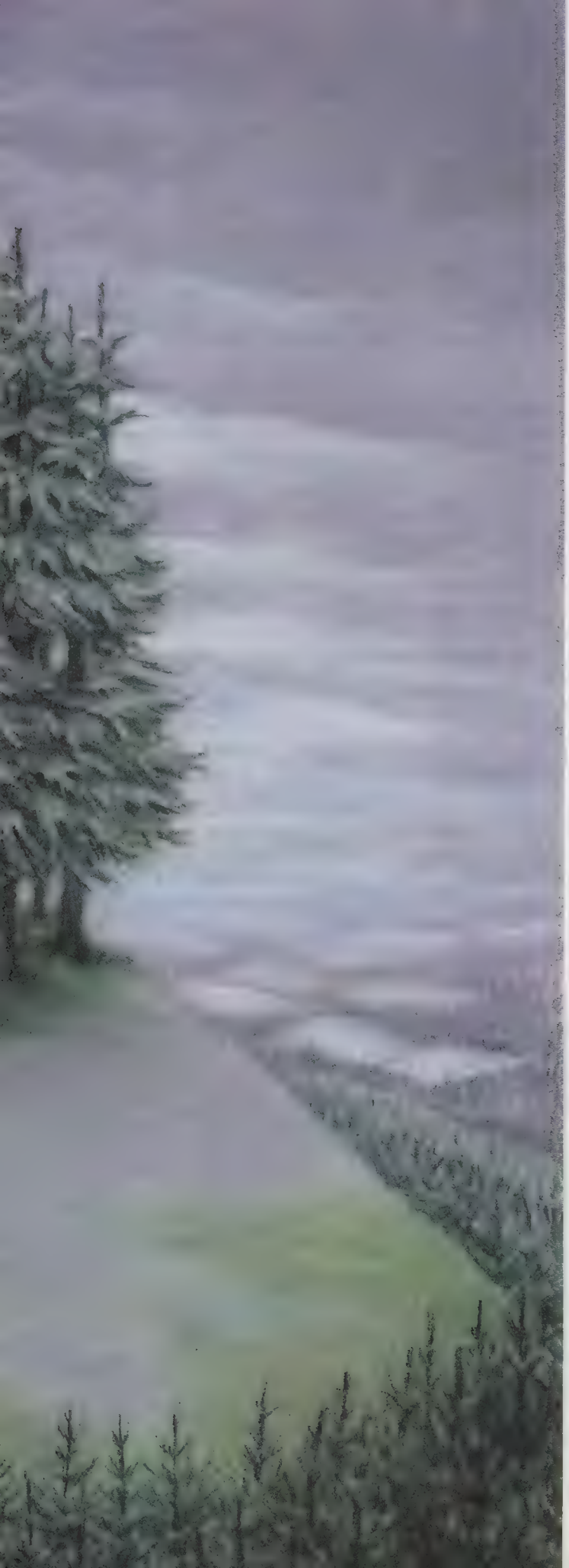


Virginia Lee's paintings and sculptures contain surrealist creatures and people reminiscent of the best of Quint Buchholz or Rudi Hurzlmeier: a plump swan in ballet slippers checking her bottom in a mirror; the ugly sister morosely holding a cushioned, too-tiny glass slipper; a floating feminine cloud whose eye is made of the wings of a soaring bird. Women fold and unfold into greening or snowy landscapes, hips and breasts following the contours of hills and valleys as though effortlessly placed there by Mother Nature herself. Graceful tree nymphs sway in the wind, some looking as though they might almost be at home in Black and DiTerlizzi's *Spiderwick* universe. Nature is ever present in these works—trees, hills, wind, clouds, animals of all types—and while certain paintings are stylistically evocative of other artists, her work is never derivative and always uniquely her own, imbued with a deep mythic resonance flowing beneath each piece and recognizable in every layer of each character she portrays.

Is talent inherited? Is it merely that having the good fortune to be raised in an atmosphere of creativity and artistic endeavor encourages children with such tendencies to blossom? In either case, surrealist fantasy artist Virginia Lee, daughter of illustrious artistic personalities, is in her very own right a rising star in the new generation of fantasy illustrators.

Virginia was born in Devon, England, in 1976. Her parents are Alan Lee—well known as the most highly regarded illustrator of the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, and as collaborator with Brian Froud on the 1978 work *Faeries,* which launched the new popularity of fairy art—and Dutch "visionary fantasy" artist Marja Lee Kruÿt. Virginia grew up in an atmosphere of myth and fairy tale imagery. As a child she posed for both her father and for faerie painter Brian Froud, and appeared in photos in several of Froud's *Lady Cottington* books. As a teenager she worked with Wendy Froud in Froud's sculpture studio, creating fantastic doll accessories to go with Froud's mythical art dolls and creatures.

At the age of sixteen, Lee went to Exeter College to study art and design. After taking two years off to travel around Europe with friends and work on her portfolio, she was accepted into Kingston University, where in 1999 she earned her degree in Illustration. Her Degree Show comprised both painting and sculpture, and included a significant project called *Inner Seasons*: "I modeled some of the well-known characters, imagining what problems they may have encountered in their various forms. The connection between nature and feminine cycles fascinates me, and for my major project I designed a series of pastel paintings called *Inner Seasons*. These depict a young girl's realization of her physical changes as she enters puberty, as she sees herself reflected in the seasonal landscape around her."[*]

Her work on *Inner Seasons* is particularly appealing, having been created when the artist was still so young and so close to the age represented in the work. Her translation of the physical changes of puberty into the seasonal landscape is exquisitely done. Budding breasts and body hair become tiny hills and new young saplings. Menstruation is represented by gigantic red mushrooms surrounding an overwhelmed young girl, and by the fiery sun within a womb of mountains and sky, and feminine figures become part of the landscape unaffectedly and

with elegance. The emotional journey of female puberty can be clearly traced through this series of surreal yet poignant images.

This early work was a sign of great things to come. After Virginia completed her degree, she travelled to New Zealand to participate in one of the most visually stunning works of fantasy film ever created: Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

The enormity of the work on the sets is legendary; teams of artists, sculptors, and technicians labored for months creating the lush environs of Lothlorien, the imposing ramparts of Minas Tirith, the stony terraces of Edoras, and the dank terrors of Mordor. Every detail was a work of art designed to capture viewers and draw them into the epic story, and to hold them there for what would ultimately become twelve hours of intense storytelling. What fan can forget sitting spellbound before the majesty of the first sight of the White City?

Lee's father Alan was one of the lead concept artists for the films (and in fact won an Academy Award for Best Art Direction/Set Decoration for *The Return of the King*). Virginia Lee used her sculptural talents to bring the elder Lee's artistic concepts from vision to reality. She says of her work there: "For the first nine months of being in New Zealand I worked in production on several sculptures for *Return of the King* in particular—the figures on the gates of Minas Tirith, the fountain under the white tree of Gondor, some figures and architectural detailing for other gates, a fountain in the Houses of Healing (which wasn't really shown). [And] also some details on King Theoden's throne in Edoras. I would sculpt the details and figures in plasticine and then it would be handed to the mould makers where it would be cast in foam polystyrene, duplicated, and painted."

Virginia also sculpted several commemorative figures sold as *Lord of the Rings* memorabilia from Sideshow Collectibles (http://www.sideshowtoy.com), among them an incredibly true-to-life bust of King Theoden and a beautifully detailed polystone plaque of the hobbits' escape off the road from the Ringwraiths.

In addition to her work as a sculptress and her independent work as a painter, Virginia Lee is becoming known as a skilled illustrator of fantasy books and other fantasy projects. Her first book with Antonia Barber was published by Frances Lincoln in 2007. A retelling of a Russian fairy tale, *The Frog Bride* called for more realistic fairy tale rather than surrealist illustrations. Lee provided richly colored and poetic *Arabian Nights*-esque princes, gardens, and ladies in the tradition of Edmund Dulac and Adrienne Segur.

She was also one of the illustrators for Ari Berk's *The Secret History of Mermaids and Creatures of the Deep,* the second in his *Secret History* series. Berk's books use multiple illustrators—in addition to Lee, *Mermaids* boasts Wayne Anderson, Gary Chalk, and Matt Dangler—and illustrations by the different artists are coordinated seamlessly through art direction into one volume. This makes it difficult for readers to identify which artist did which illustration, but Lee's illustrations have a visionary, romantic quality about them which gives them a certain notable depth. Perhaps it's the eyes. Whether painted, drawn, or sculpted, the eyes in Virginia Lee's pieces all have a similar haunting quality. Soulful and thoughtful, they gaze out from their settings and engage the viewer as if to say, "We know something of the Other."

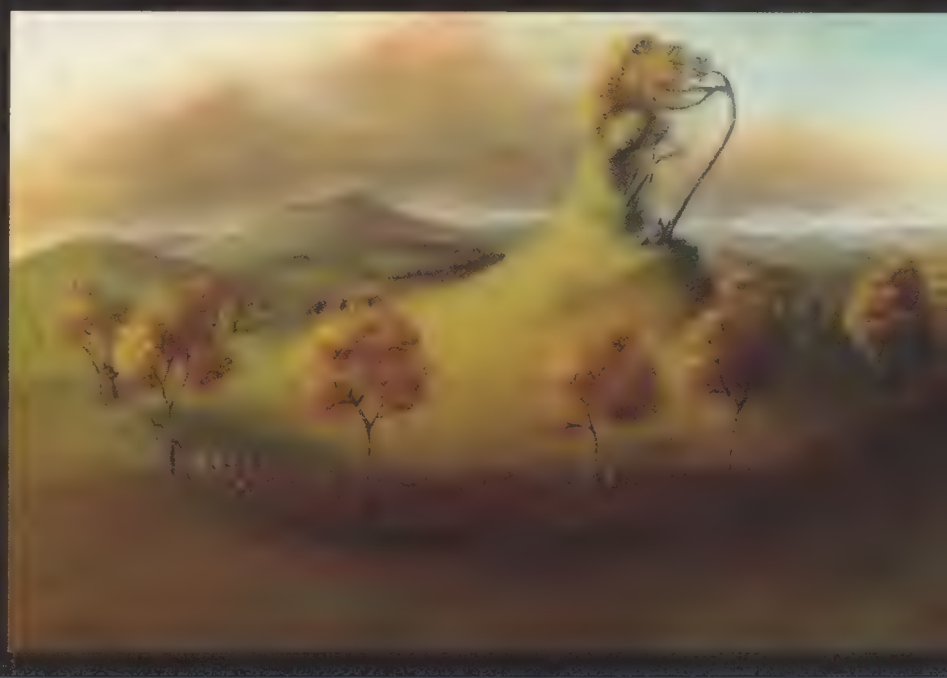
It may also be the grace of movement with which she imbues her subjects. If her illustrations for *The Frog Bride* are reminiscent of Dulac and other fairy tale illustrators who sometimes used a Russian or Eastern style, she brings a lifelike flow to the scenes which her predecessors occasionally neglected. Prince Ivan drawing a bow that seems to have real tension; birds truly seem to fly and dancing girls to dance. Perhaps because of her background in sculpture, Lee adds a touch of natural movement in her paintings which brings characters and landscapes to life on the page. Her sculptures themselves, no matter how fantastical the subject, seem actual creatures frozen in time. A tree woman with branches growing from her hair twists away from the viewer so lithely that one believes she might escape at any moment. An owl maiden (who could be one of the desert creatures from Terri

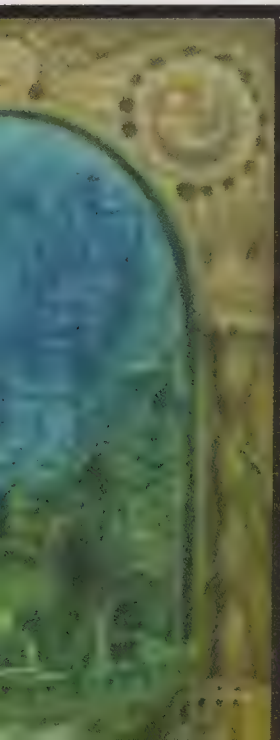
Windling's *The Wood Wife*!) appears ready to take flight at the slightest noise. A whimsical Lady Snake appears ready to pirouette away into the grass!

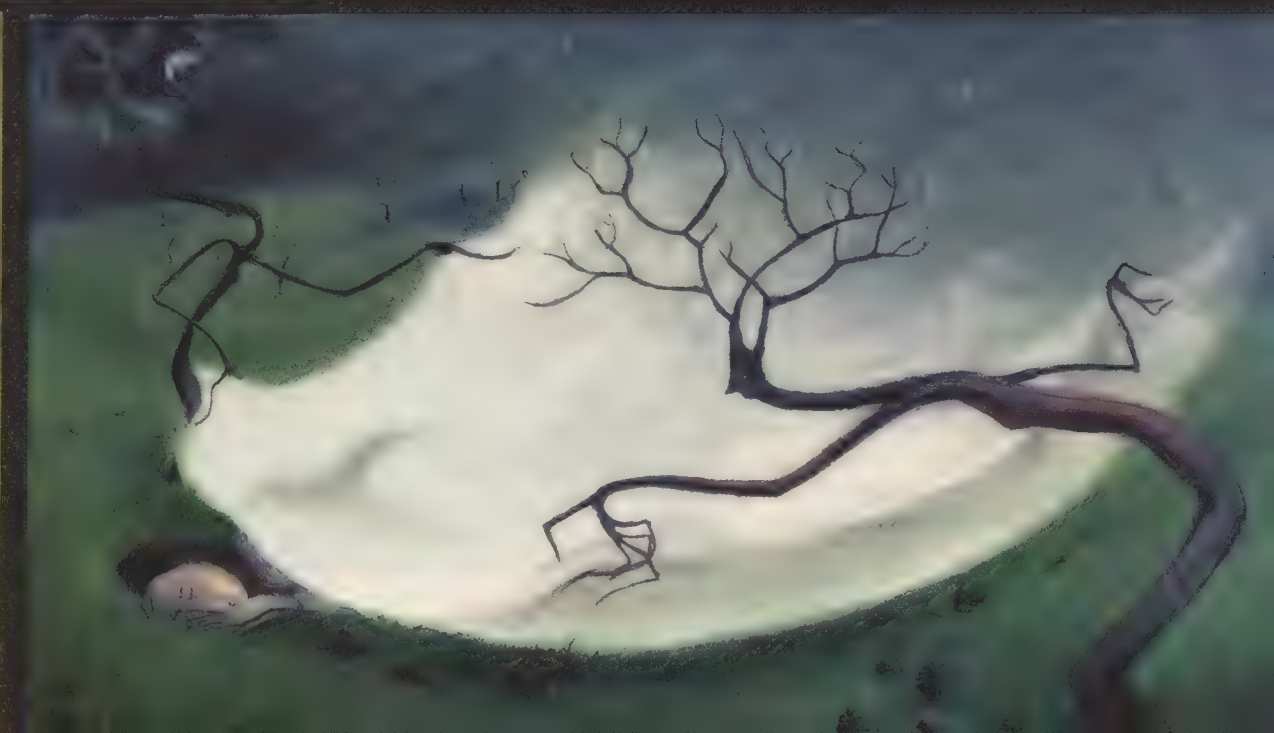
Lee works with many different media: charcoal, pastels, pencil, oils, plaster, clay, and other materials, and the natural world is clearly her biggest inspiration. Trees especially make repeated appearances in her work: entwined tree people dance, birds nest in a tree nymph's leafy "hair," a birch lady's papery bark becomes a Victorian gown, a deer-woman rests atop a hill in a cathedral of snowy evergreens. The viewer senses a deep connection between Lee and the forests of fairy tale and myth, the forests of old gods and dryads and mysterious secrets. As Terri Windling's *Journal of Mythic Arts* said of Virginia Lee: "Such visions come from the wilderness—the primeval forest in mythic quests; the endangered forests of our modern world; and the dark forests of the psyche, representing an inward journey through deep realms of the soul."

She also depicts gentle hills with great frequency, perhaps unsurprisingly given her upbringing in Devon and Dartmoor. Rolling hills are a major theme in her *Inner Seasons* work, and hills appear often in her landscapes and illustrations, whether as backgrounds or as actual anthropomorphic characters.

Her love for surrealism and whimsical sense of humor is most apparent in her treatment of animals and anthropomorphic people. Her female characters are sometimes vamps—a







seductive woman in armored boots and bustier with her scorpion tail coiled over her shoulder represents the zodiac sign of Scorpio, and Tori Amos is a sexy mermaid in Lee's contribution to the RAINN charity calendar. But her characters can be matronly too, as a housewifely crab attends to her brood in "Cancer" and a proper and aristocratic cow-woman appears ready for a night at the opera in "Taurus." In a sculpture entitled *Big Is Beautiful,* a plump cherubic butterfly-man appears as though his tiny fairylike wings are not quite strong enough to keep him aloft, and a sculptured frog prince appears rather cranky, obviously having grown tired of waiting for his kiss.

Virginia is clear about what else inspires her, and what other tales and authors she'd like to illustrate:

"I am particularly drawn to myths and fairy tales which involve a transformation or creation of some kind, whether it is with a character or a landscape. I chose to take on the Russian fairy tale of the frog princess (retold by Antonia Barber as *The Frog Bride*) initially because I wanted to illustrate her taking off and putting on her frog skin. My desire to work with layers, skins, and disguises hasn't waned so perhaps a good fairy tale to illustrate would be that of *Donkeyskin*. As for authors, I'm particularly inspired by Angela Carter, especially her short stories from *The Bloody Chamber,* and I would love to create images for the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy one day."

Angela Carter's work has inspired many artists, and certainly Virginia Lee's illustrations would be a fascinating accompaniment to the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy, the United Kingdom's first female poet laureate. One imagines what Lee would do with Duffy's "I give you an onion/ It is a moon wrapped in brown paper." Layers, skins, and disguises, indeed.

Lee has recently contributed illustrations to an interesting new project by John and Caitlin Matthews. Published by Templar, the *StoryWorld* cards are intended, according to their website, to be "a toolkit for the imagination." The cards contain pictures of characters, places, and objects intended to be starting points for storytelling. Illustrations by Lee and other artists serve as story prompts for groups or individuals using the *StoryWorld* cards for writing stories or playing games. As any one of Virginia Lee's individual works could, in true interstitial fashion, inspire a story or a poem, the possibilities for intentional use of illustration in this fashion are intriguing.

Currently Lee has a variety of other projects on her plate: "My most recent publication has been a picture book of the myth of *Persephone*, written by Sally Pomme Clayton. I wanted to illustrate the story with the Underworld and the Overworld simultaneously, so there is a cross-sectioning in many of the pictures. The symbolism of the seasons is something that has inspired me much in my previous work, so it was satisfying to work within a story that describes the seasons' creation in a mythical way… Coming out this year is the next in the series of *Secret History: Hobgoblins*. Also I'll be working on a children's book with Ari Berk, but I don't know if I'm allowed to say more than that.

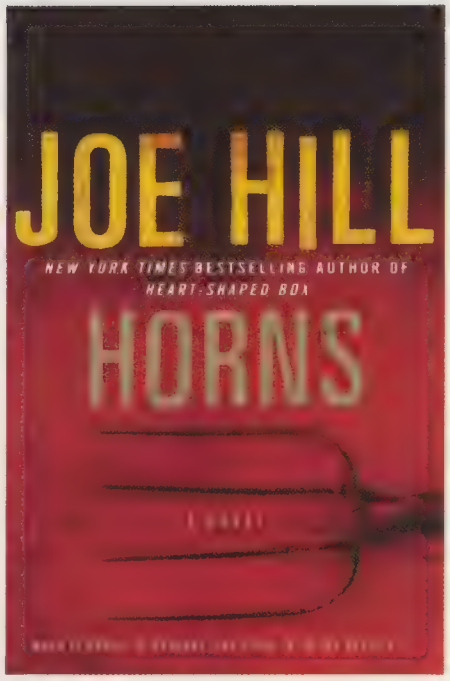
I'm currently working on my own idea for a children's book, as well as doing some personal visionary pieces revealing souls within nature's vessels [such as in] nuts and seeds."

As one of the new generation of fantasy illustrators, Virginia Lee is just beginning, and yet she's already established herself as a skilled and dedicated artist with an amazing depth of vision. With rumors still swirling about the status of *The Hobbit,* one hopes that both Alan and Virginia Lee will again be called upon to add their distinctive talents to the film visuals when it goes into production. Virginia Lee is definitely an illustrator to watch for in the future as she explores and expands her talents and gifts. Is it nature or nurture that makes an artist? Perhaps it is a bit of both—but in the case of Virginia Lee, it's hard work, dedication, and vision that makes a great artist, and that's what truly matters. ☙

*Quote taken from an interview in the *Journal of Mythic Arts,* http://www.endicott-studio.com.

Paul Witcover
Matt Staggs

It takes balls to write a book like *Horns* (William Morrow, hardcover, 384 pp., $25.99, ISBN: 978-0-06114-795-1). Not just because this horror novel comes with literary aspirations—most of which it actually manages to attain without looking pretentious in the process—but even more because it doesn't merely evince sympathy for the devil: it outright embraces the dude. Unlike so much horror out there, which tries to have its cake and eat it, too, glorifying perversion, violence, and evil only to hypocritically condemn them in the last act, often with a sanctimoniousness far more nauseating than any of the vile acts leading up to it, *Horns* has the courage of its convictions. It presents a very Crowleyesque—that's Aleister, not John—view of Christianity, of God and the Devil, and it does so with abandon, and without apology. This second novel by Joe Hill, the talented young author of *20th Century Ghosts* and *Heart-Shaped Box*, is not without its rough spots and excesses, even incoherencies, but its intelligence, originality, and intensity, helped along by healthy dollops of black humor, more than make up for any lapses.



The central conceit of the novel is a simple, concrete detail—one which, though firmly grounded in the physical, extends into the metaphysical. To wit: one morning, Ignatius William Parrish, twenty-six, the younger son of a famous jazz musician, brother to a famous late-night TV star, and shattered loser mourning the years-ago violent rape and murder of his childhood sweetheart, Merrin—a crime for which he was himself arrested and, though released due to lack of evidence, remains widely suspected of having committed—awakens after a night spent "drunk and doing terrible things" to find a pair of knobby protuberances sprouting from his forehead. Horns.

These horns have a disturbing effect on his somewhat skanky girlfriend, Glenna—an effect repeated to intensifying horrific and comic effect as the morning wears on and Ig seeks help for his bizarre condition from friends, family, clergy, and the medical profession. Glenna and anyone else exposed to Ig's horns find themselves unable to repress the kind of brutal truths that civil society demands we learn to censor. Confession may be good for the soul, but it's not necessarily good for Ig, as he learns, to his horror, that even his parents harbor doubts of his innocence, and that men and women he had heretofore liked or respected are, in their secret selves, contemptible hypocrites…and worse. This series of brutal disillusionments—imagine Otis B. Driftwood's ignominious expulsion from the opera house in *A Night at the Opera*, and take it to the nth degree—culminates in the shocking revelation of the identity of Merrin's true killer.

Hill then flashes us back in time to the two formative experiences of Ig's childhood: his love-at-first-sight meeting with Merrin, and his near-drowning in the Knowles River, from which he was pulled not by his older brother Terry, who was too stunned to act, but by the boy who would become his closest friend, Lee Tourneau. Readers spot Merrin's future killer there among Ig's boyhood acquaintances, but, of course, Ig doesn't yet know it, and this gap between the understanding of readers and that of Ig's more innocent boyhood self is quite poignant at times. Hill alternates between past and present in relating his story, mainly sticking to Ig's point of view but occasionally giving us the perspective of Merrin or Lee or Terry.

Back in the present, Ig's horns are not only affecting other people, they are also changing him, encouraging his own darker traits of vindictiveness and spite, along with an appetite for cruelty and violence—though, it must be said, his targets always merit punishment, which of course does not mean he has any right to be the punisher. It's disturbing to readers—and to Ig, too, in the moments of moral clarity that remain to him once his equilibrium, if not his sanity, is shattered by learning the identity of Merrin's killer. That killer is the only one who is immune to the effects of the horns, making him or her an even more dangerous adversary than might otherwise be the case. Nevertheless, Ig sets out to avenge Merrin.

At the heart of the novel—echoing the idyllic tryst shared by the doomed lovers Tristan and Isolde—is an afternoon spent by Ig and Merrin in a strange treehouse located in the middle of the woods, an otherworldly sanctuary that they dub the Tree House of the Mind. There, before a bizarre altar bedecked with tiny china dolls in the shapes of angels, saints, and the devil, they make love and pray. Yet they are never able to find the place again, and the quest for it, which is both literal and metaphorical, works as a kind of counterpoint to Ig's single-minded quest for vengeance.

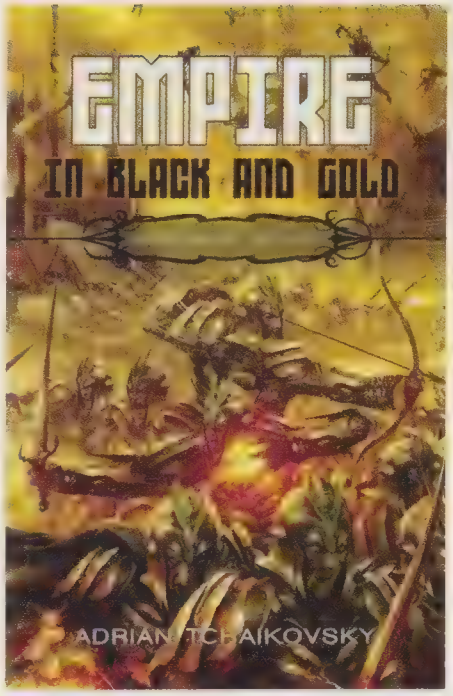
Opposed to the treehouse is an abandoned foundry near the spot where Merrin was killed. This becomes Ig's new refuge, his fortress of solitude, where he preaches a twisted gospel to a rapt audience of snakes. Clearly Ig is in danger of being corrupted by his devilish horns—but what is the nature of that corruption? And in what does salvation lie? The fact that Hill overturns so many trite and conventional expectations in the course of this novel should lead one to suspect that

the answers to these questions will also prove to be iconoclastic.

Adrian Tchaikovsky's *Empire in Black and Gold* (Pyr, trade paperback, 418 pp., $16.00, ISBN: 978-1-61614-192-9), the first novel in the Shadows of the Apt series, marks one of the most accomplished heroic fantasy debuts since Scott Lynch's *The Lies of Locke Lamora*. At various times during my reading, I was reminded of Lynch, of China Miéville, of K. J. Parker, and even, underneath it all, holding the novel together and providing its irresistible narrative impulse, Tolkien. Tchaikovsky is not the equal of any of these writers, not yet, but he is smart and talented, and he's got imagination to burn.

In the dim prehistory of Tchaikovsky's fantasy world, human beings, at the mercy of gigantic insects, entered into a form of communion with what I suppose you could say were the platonic essences of the various species, in the process infusing physical and mental characteristics of those species into themselves genetically via some kind of sympathetic magic. Now, millennia later, humans belong to various *kinden*, all associated with a particular type of insect and its attendant attributes, both physical and metaphorical. For example, Ant-kinden are linked in a kind of hive mind; Spider-kinden are subtle and devious manipulators; Mantis-kinden are gifted fighters; Beetle-kinden are slow and stolid engineers; Dragonfly-kinden are graceful flyers and seducers. Some of the insect-derived abilities are innate, while others—such as flight—need to be awakened via a process known as meditation. This process comes more easily to some individuals than to others. "The Art was common to all the kinden, yet unique to each."

For time out of mind, the Moth-kinden, Mantis-kinden, and Dragonfly-kinden, among others, held absolute, godlike power over the other, lesser kinden. Then, about five hundred years ago, those subject kinden awoke to practical attributes within themselves their masters lacked. In an analogue to the Renaissance, Reformation, and Scientific Revolution all rolled into one, the slaves threw off their oppressors by means of new ways of thinking—and technologies invented and manufactured via those new



ways of thinking. The kinden possessing these new abilities are known as the Apt. Under sustained attack by ideas so alien as to be incomprehensible, and by weapons and modes of warfare too efficient to be countered by traditional means, including magic, the old empires—with a couple of partial exceptions—crashed and burned. Magic was equated to rank superstition, and reason was elevated to its vacated throne.

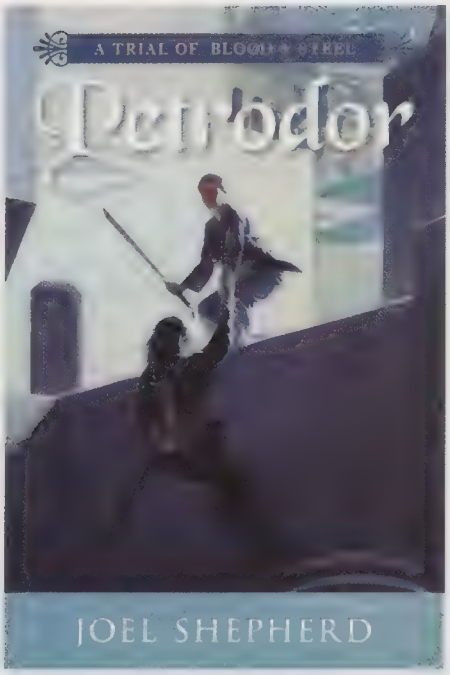
Now, in place of the dusty empires of the past, vibrant young kingdoms of Apt kinden strive to grow and prosper, struggling—sometimes violently—against each other and against atavistic remnants of their former overlords who, reluctant to admit defeat, wage a guerrilla war and continue to practice their old traditions, including a debased but sporadically effective magic. The brash city-states of the Lowlands, with the ancient kingdoms of the Spiderlands on one side and the Dragonfly-kinden–dominated Commonweal on the other, are the steampunky hotbed of Apt innovation, trade, and rivalry.

A prologue relates the fall of an Ant-kinden city on the outskirts of the Lowlands. The city has been besieged by an invading army of Wasp-kinden, who come equipped not only with Apt weapons but with a magical sting of their own. Resplendent in their black and gold armor, the Wasps fight with a mechanized precision not even the hive-minded Ant-kinden can match. The city is betrayed, possibly by one of a group of outsiders from various kinden ostensibly come to observe and help in its defense. That group is led by Stenwold Maker, a Beetle-kinden from the city of Collegium, home to the Great College, center of Apt learning. Also present is a Mantis-kinden weaponsmaster named Tisamon, terse and deadly. Missing at the pivotal moment is Atryssa, a Spider-kinden, and it is assumed by all, but especially by Tisamon, who has flouted a centuries-old animosity between the two non-Apt races by falling deeply in love with her, that it is she who betrayed the city to the Wasps.

Flash forward seventeen years. Stenwold is a master at the Great College, a position from which he has tirelessly, in the manner of Churchill, warned of the imminent invasion of the Wasps, whom he believes to have an agenda of world domination. Like Churchill, he is a voice in the wilderness, mocked by a political and mercantile elite who prefer the easy illusions of present prosperity to the grim realities of what lies ahead. In their folly, the Lowlands Apt are actually arming the Wasps, who in the meantime have embarked on a long war against the Commonweal.

That war has now ended in a truce favorable to the Wasps, and Wasp emissaries and ambassadors are entering the Lowlands in unprecedented numbers. Stenwold fears the hour of the invasion he has been predicting for seventeen years has come round at last. He has done more than predict it; in his own way, he has tried to prepare, using his post at the College to recruit his students into a spy network that now extends all across the Lowlands—including the city of Helleron, where the Wasps seem to have taken a special interest.

Unfortunately, they have also taken an interest in him, as reflected in an assassination attempt that nearly succeeds. Shaken, Stenwold sends his latest batch of college-age recruits, most of whom are far from being prepared for such a mission, to Helleron, where they are to meet one of his agents already in place. This group consists of a half-breed apprentice engineer, Totho; a Dragonfly-kinden named Salma, a prince among his people; Stenwold's niece, Cheerwell,



called Che; and Tynisa, a Spider-kinden girl of mysterious parentage whom he has raised as his ward. Needless to say, these young people are bound with tangled threads of resentment, unrequited love, and hidden secrets. It was at this point that I began to notice similarities to a group of Hobbits dispatched by a certain gray eminence to Bree; there are echoes of *Lord of the Rings* here, no mistake, but not to worry: Tchaikovsky is not going the Terry Brooks route. He's taken the basic skeleton of Tolkien's masterpiece, but the flesh and blood are all his own.

Amy Greene's enthralling first novel, *Bloodroot* (Knopf, hardcover, 296 pp., $24.95, ISBN: 978-0-30726-986-7), is being marketed as a mainstream novel, but lovers of the fantastic will find much to enjoy in this beautifully written, heartbreaking, horrifying, yet ultimately uplifting tale of an Appalachian family blessed by gentle faerie magic and stalked by a malign curse that recurs across generations.

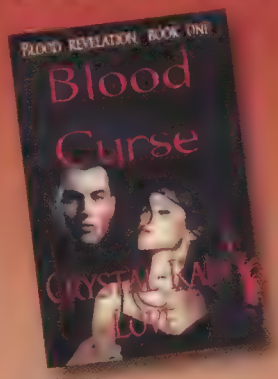
Greene is one of those rare mainstream writers with a genuine affinity for fantasy, even if she approaches it from a different angle than genre writers typically do; the magic in *Bloodroot* is made of small, ordinary moments, and is presented in an utterly matter-of-fact fashion, as simply part of what makes a person who they are. Much of the time it is barely visible at all, either in the background or so taken for granted by the characters as to be unworthy of mention. It doesn't hurt that Greene is writing in the Southern Gothic tradition, which, of all mainstream categories, is closest to the fantastic. *Bloodroot* reminded me a bit of Lee Smith's *Oral History*, one of the best ghost stories of the last century, which is similarly set in Appalachia and also spans generations of fraught and tangled family relationships.

The title, *Bloodroot*, refers to both a place and a flower. The flower, named for its blood-red color, can cure or kill; and the same is true of Bloodroot Mountain, where three generations of the Lamb family experience joys and sufferings that come to resonate on a mythological level, as if they are the gods and demigods of a homegrown Olympus. At the center of the novel is Myra Lamb, a strange, dreamy girl who grows into a woman of uncanny beauty and fragility. Her story, which is part romance, part horror, part magic, and capital-T tragic, is told not only in her own voice but the voices of her grandmother, Byrdie, a "granny woman" with a powerful connection to the native spirits of the mountain; her children, Johnny and Laura, who take very different paths as they grow to adulthood; and her husband, John, a handsome, violent man who labors under a curse of his own.

Greene divides the novel into four sections, each told in the first person, and each nailing with absolute authenticity the distinctive voice of its narrator. The first section is divided between Byrdie and Douglas Cotter, a neighbor boy with a crush on Myra. The second is divided between Johnny and Laura. The third belongs to Myra. And the fourth, a brief but weighty epilogue, is John's. The sections skip back and forth in time, sprawling out in a leisurely but not undirected manner to explore from varying angles and facets all the roots of love and desire, disappointment and madness, that have gone into producing Myra, who is a kind of culmination of events and decisions unknowingly entered into by Byrdie when she was just a young woman.

Questions of fate and destiny, as much as of crime and punishment, hang over this superbly evocative first novel, whose tone runs the gamut from sweetly lyrical to starkly horrific.

Blood Curse
by Crystal-Raine Love



ISBN: 978-1-933417-05-9

Blood Revelation Series, Book One:
When Aria Michaels sets out to find the vampire who took her mother's life, she's stunned when she finds Rialto Renaldi, the vampire who has been haunting her dreams, instead.

Rialto agrees to help Aria, but the pair soon learns that fate brought them together for a much larger purpose, and fate has every intention of destroying them if they don't fulfill their roles in the Blood Revelation Prophecy.

The Vampire's Kiss
by Cynthia Eden

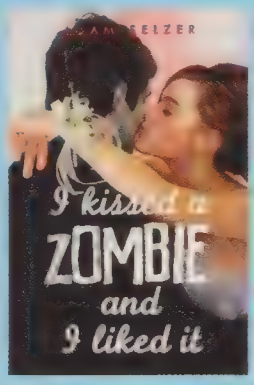
Available from Imajinn Books,
www.imajinnbooks.com.
Use coupon code 2OOT at checkout
and get 20% off your order.

Young Adult Fantasy Books

by Michael Jones

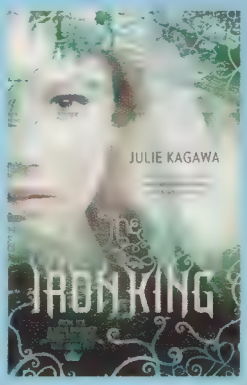
I Kissed a Zombie, and I Liked It, Adam Selzer, Delacorte Books for Young Readers, trade, 178pp, $7.99, ISBN 978-0-38573-503-2

Ever since the undead came out of the coffin and went public, there's been a certain dangerous cachet to dating the so-called post-humans. Snarky ice queen Alley Rhodes used to mock such people, until she fell head over heels for Doug, a zombie who wants her heart, not her brains. But everyone's got an opinion about the new relationship; some of the local vampires are downright upset by the thought of interspecies dating. Can Alley and Doug make this work, or is their love dead on arrival? Selzer simultaneously skewers the worst excesses of the *Twilight* phenomenon and delivers a solidly entertaining romance in its own right. Clever and humorous, this one's not to be missed.



***The Iron King*, Julie Kagawa, Harlequin Teen, trade, 363pp, $9.99, ISBN 978-0-37321-008-4**

When her little brother is kidnapped and replaced by a changeling, Meghan Chase enlists the help of her best friend Robbie to travel into Faery to rescue him. Faery is wild and treacherous; even with the allies she acquires along the way, it'll take all of her resourcefulness to achieve her goals. To complicate matters, a strange new threat endangers not just her, but all of Faery and its myriad inhabitants, and Meghan alone possesses the strength to save the day. The secret of that strength, however, will call her entire life into question. Filled with wonder and danger, romance and magic, this entry into a new world adds a new spin to old fairy tales, sure to appeal to fans of Holly Black.



***Firespell*, Chloe Neill, Signet, paperback, 246pp, $6.99, ISBN 978-0-45122-886-4**

With her academically minded parents moving to Germany for the next two years, Lily is sent to the exclusive St. Sophia's, a Chicago girls' school.

Unlikely searchers:
Twylgalit...sent by the trees to find a champion
Rafi...a young gryphon allergic to magic
Jody Burns...wants to get back to shopping at the mall
Talking To Trees
Kathryn Sullivan
"...a great read for teens who
– Gretchen, Fallen An
"...There are talking trees, dryad
Great fun!" – Lesley,
Agents & Adepts
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Winner of the 2003 Dream Realm Award for Best Anthology
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The Crystal Throne
Winner of the 2002 EPPIE Award for best Fantasy
A Trio Of Great Works By Kathryn Sullivan
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There, she makes friends with Scout, whose nocturnal escapades arouse Lily's curiosity, and soon Lily is neck-deep in a secret war between two factions of magic-users, with her own life hanging in the balance. Mysteries abound—such as why she was sent to St. Sophia's in the first place, and who can truly be trusted. Fast-paced, witty, thoroughly entertaining, this first in a series is a whole lot of fun.

***Fallen*, Lauren Kate, Delacorte Books for Young Readers, hardcover, 452pp, $22.99, ISBN 978-0-38573-893-4**

Banished to the oppressive Sword & Cross boarding school after an unfortunate incident at her last school, Luce struggles to fit in with the misfits, loners, losers, and delinquents who make up the student body. For every friend she makes, there's an enemy, and no one is what they seem. As she falls for the aloof, unapproachable Daniel Grigori, Luce slowly realizes she's surrounded by deadly secrets, the most dangerous explaining why she and Daniel can never be together. The answers will change her life forever. This dark tale is atmospheric, tense, and alluring, steeped in Gothic imagery and ancient legends.

***Undead Much?*, Stacey Jay, Razorbill, trade, 306pp, $8.99, ISBN 978-1-59514-273-3**

Megan thought it was hard juggling pom squad practice, her love life, and keeping wandering zombies from terrorizing the unknowing populace. But that was before feral super-zombies started rampaging, the cheerleaders declared war on the pom squad, and a cute undead psychic started hanging around. Now, if she can't find out who's raising the angry dead, she'll take the blame, assuming she survives that long. And what dark secret is her family hiding that could explain it all? Jay continues her series about the feisty Zombie Settler with this amusing, sometimes-convoluted adventure that reads like classic *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

***Wish*, Alexandra Bullen, Point, hardcover, 324pp, $17.99, ISBN 978-0-54513-905-2**

Still mourning the loss of her twin sister Violet, Olivia shrinks into the background even after her family moves to San Francisco. When secretly granted three wishes by a mysterious benefactor, she uses the first to bring back Violet, who appears as a ghost. With Violet's help, Olivia will learn to live for herself. But what else will she wish for, and will she regret it later? Though at times awkwardly predictable, this sweet fairy tale is also poignant and romantic, reminding us all that there can be life after loss, and that love can be magical.

***Hearts at Stake*, Alyxandra Harvey, Walker Books for Young Readers, trade, 248pp, $9.99, ISBN 978-0-80272-074-0**

At sixteen, most girls get a party. Solange Drake, however, is going to die, and be reborn as a vampire, like the rest of her family. Unfortunately, she's the much-desired pawn in a game between vampire factions, and the rule seems to be: if you can't have her, kill her. Only her seven older brothers, her best friend Lucy, and a vampire hunter as an unexpected(ly sexy) ally can keep her safe when the fighting and assassination attempts begin. The tension is sharp, the action cinematic, the characters memorable, and the whole package delightfully charming. Lucy, the spunky token human, steals every scene she's in, making her my favorite.

***The Dark Divine*, Bree Despain, Egmont USA, hardcover, 372pp, $17.99, ISBN 978-1-60684-057-3**

Pastor's daughter Grace Divine takes a walk on the wild side when old secrets come to light. An old family friend, her former crush Daniel Kalbi, is back after an absence of years, his return sparking a rash of unusual activity and animal attacks in the area. Inevitably, Grace and Daniel fall for one another, even though their relationship drives a wedge between Grace and her brother Jude. The truth about Daniel may just kill Grace, if she doesn't have to kill him first. Werewolf lore, ancient myth, and tragic romance are intertwined in this dark, satisfying tale.

***Magic Under Glass*, Jaclyn Dolamore, Bloomsbury USA Children's Books, hardcover, 320pp, $16.99, ISBN 978-1-59990-430-6**

Nimira left her homeland to seek her fortunes, but instead found work only as a trouser girl, singing the songs of her youth while men ogled her exotic charms. When an opportunity arises to better herself by singing accompaniment for a clockwork piano-player, she takes it, never looking back. Soon she discovers that the clockwork man is alive, inhabited by the spirit of a fairy prince, and a variety of powerful people want it for their own. As Nimira, falling in love with the fairy, seeks to undo the curse imprisoning him, she's drawn further into the enigmatic schemes of sorcerers and madmen. Evoking the rich strangeness of the Victorian era and setting it in a world where magic is subtle and pervasive, this marks a brilliant debut for Dolamore. Nimira is a fascinating, sympathetic character, and her unusual origins make for a breath of fresh air. ∞

Michael M. Jones, writer and book reviewer, lives in Roanoke, VA, with a herd of cats, a vast mountain of books, and a very patient wife. He's sworn not to die until he's finished reading his backlog of books. His ever-growing archive of reviews can be found at www.michaelmjones.com.

The Lake Isle of Two Kings
a novel of supernatural adventure by Alveric Yates
"The only way to fight an army of ghosts is to defeat yourself," said the old ghost-talker, but his granddaughter thought: he's just trying to get himself killed.
www.lake-isle.net

Paul Witcover is the author of the novels *Waking Beauty*, *Tumbling After*, and *Dracula: Asylum*, and the collection *Everland*. He is also the author of *Zora Neale Hurston*, a biography. He lives on the edge of Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York.

Mr. Shivers, Robert Jackson Bennett, Orbit, hardcover, 336 pp., $19.99, ISBN: 978-0-31605-468-3

Four men go in search of a mysterious, scar-faced killer in *Mr. Shivers*, the first novel from Texan author Robert Jackson Bennett.

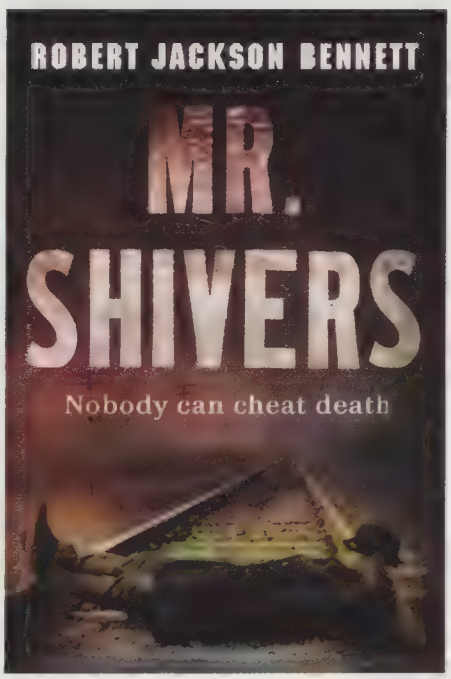
The Great Depression is in full swing, forcing thousands of Americans out of work and onto the nation's roads and railways in search of ever-more-scarce employment. A killer wanders in their midst, leaving behind him a trail of senseless and brutal murders that stretches from one end of the country to the other. The desperate men and women that live in the migrant camps and Hoovervilles know him as "Mr. Shivers," and they swap stories about him; his scarred visage and sharp knives seem to lurk in every shadow.

Most of those who have lost a loved one to his gruesome appetite, do their best to make peace with their loss and move on, but not all: an enigmatic wanderer named Connelly and his traveling companions have pledged to find and kill Mr. Shivers. Their quest takes them directly into the Dust Bowl: a landscape of nearly apocalyptic suffering dotted with abandoned towns and crawling with bandits. As the travelers close on their quarry, they begin to suspect that he is no ordinary madman.

The author tries to imbue Connelly's journey with a mythic resonance that doesn't always work—an interlude where Connelly visits with a trio of witches is particularly groan-inducing for a number of reasons—but as long as Bennett keeps things on solid ground (which is most of the time), *Mr. Shivers* is a genuinely suspenseful and imaginative read.

***Soulless*, Gail Carriger, Orbit, mass market paperback, 384 pp., $7.99, ISBN: 978-0-31605-663-2**

Poor Alexia Tarabotti. In a Victorian England that values prim, trim, proper, and demure ladies, she's an intellectual who doesn't hold her tongue. She has an appetite for good food, and has a voluptuous figure to show for it. Her scandalized mother and half sisters blame it all on her late Italian father and assume that Alexia, unmarried at twenty-six, is



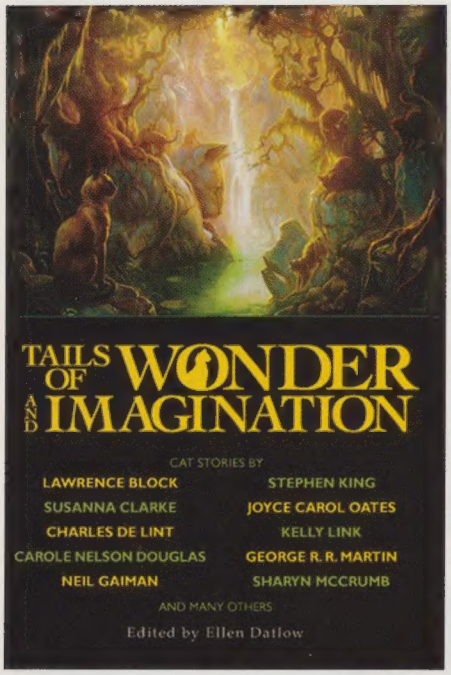
destined for a lifetime of spinsterhood. However, there's one last scandalous secret that even her family doesn't know: Alexia is soulless. In a world populated by werewolves, vampires, and other supernaturals, Alexia's rare metaphysical defect makes her something of a pariah. Her mere touch renders vampires and werewolves powerless and vulnerable to sunlight and other dangers.

At a fancy party Alexia wanders off alone in search of something to eat and encounters a young vampire with the same thing in mind. She is forced to dispatch the creature with a judicious application of blows from her leaded parasol, and a quick jab to the heart from her wooden hairpin. The killing places Alexia in the sights of Lord Maccon, a werewolf and investigator with the Queen's Bureau of Unnatural Registry. Not that Alexia minds, necessarily: Maccon is brash, loud, and messy, but he is also incredibly handsome, a combination that irritates and arouses her in equal measures. Then a rogue vampire presents them with a mystery that demands a solution. England's vampires are created very rarely, and all of them receive a proper education from their hive mother before they are allowed to wander unescorted. A vampire who would be foolish enough to attack Alexia is unheard of, but attack he did, and the Bureau must investigate. Not content to simply stand aside and let the infuriating Lord Maccon and his Bureau handle the affair, Alexia strikes out on her own.

Alexia is a charming character: headstrong and unafraid to make her own way in a stiflingly conservative society, with a tongue as sharp as any vampire's fangs or werewolf's claws. The author's supernatural England is also well conceived and imaginative. Carriger has managed to create a delightfully urbane novel that will be a surefire hit among fans of steampunk and supernatural romance.

***Tails of Wonder and Imagination: Cat Stories*, edited by Ellen Datlow, Night Shade Books, trade paperback, $15.95, ISBN: 978-1-59780-170-6**

From Ernest Hemingway's famous six-toed polydactyl pussycats to speculative fiction's well-known feline fanciers like



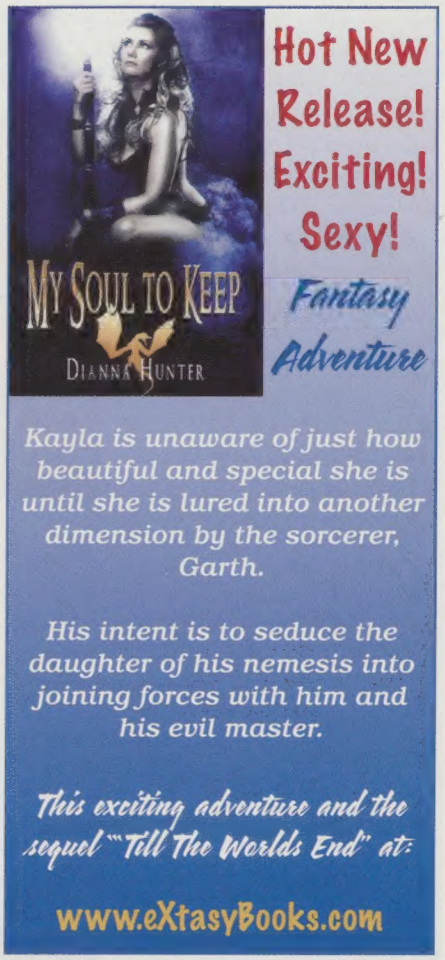
Michael Moorcock, John Scalzi, and Neil Gaiman, writers and cats have always had a special relationship. Editor Ellen Datlow, no small fan of cats herself, has collected the best of cat-themed fantastic fiction in *Tails of Wonder and Imagination*. This is the second volume of cat stories edited under Datlow's capable direction, the first being 1996's all-original horror fiction collection *Twists of the Tale*, and three stories from that volume are reprinted here: "Catch" by Ray Vukcevich, "No Heaven Will Not Ever Heaven Be..." by A. R. Morlan, and "Not Waving" by Michael Marshall Smith.

As anyone who shares a home with a cat can tell you, they're complicated creatures. They are hiding one moment and purring at your feet the next. They're soft and cuddly, but have sharp claws and fangs like needles. Much like cats themselves, the stories collected in *Tails of Wonder and Imagination* are an unpredictable bunch. Beyond their consistently high quality, there's no one theme uniting these stories beyond the presence of cats—or catlike beings—in one form or another. To be sure, there are more than just house cats lurking in these pages: manticores, ghosts, and more inhabit the pages therein, and not all of them are friendly.

There are forty stories in all. Some of the highlights: Charles de Lint offers a story of sorcery, were-cats, and revenge in "Dark Eyes, Faith, and Devotion," one of his Newford tales. A manticore's venom holds the key to recovering a wizard's long-lost love in Jeffrey Ford's "The Manticore Spell." Nancy Etchemendy, who in the introduction to her story relates her own ambivalent feelings toward cats, weaves a tale of a mysterious artifact and even more mysterious deaths in "Cat in Glass." Peter S. Beagle offers a particularly charming tale of a mouse who decides to attend Cat School in "Gordon, the Self-Made Cat."

Like any self-respecting feline, most of the fiction in *Tails of Wonder and Imagination* refuses easy classification, but readers who love cats will find these tales well worth chasing. ☙

Matt Staggs is Realms of Fantasy's games reviewer and also a regular contributor of fiction reviews. When he's not reading, writing or gaming, Matt enjoys spending time with his wife and surfing the web. If you'd like to send Matt a book or game for review, contact him at mattormeg@gmail.com.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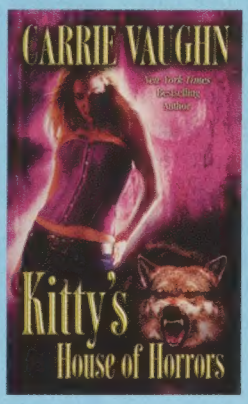
Paranormal Romance
by Elizabeth Bear

Rumor has it that *Kitty's House of Horrors* (mass market paperback, 304 pp., $7.99, ISBN: 978-0-44619-955-1), the seventh volume, will also be Carrie Vaughn's last Kitty Norville book for Grand Central Publishing, the former Warner Books. She is said to be moving the series elsewhere for any potential forthcoming volumes.

I haven't been following these closely, so I came to this with a limited knowledge of backstory and no expectations. (I have thought for a long time that the title of the first book in the series, *Kitty and the Midnight Hour*, was one of the best I've heard of in the subgenre.) I found this book a pleasant surprise—breezy and sharp, with a protagonist who does not conform to the overused tropes of the genre. Kitty Norville is neither brittle nor—okay, she's a bit mouthy, but she's got a good line of patter as a first-person narrator and she never comes across as pointlessly rude.

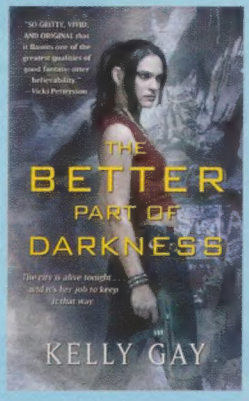
The structure of the novel is essentially *Ten Little Indians*, with the bulk of the setup being used to introduce Kitty, separate her from her support structure, and introduce the inevitable cast of victims

and villains. After she's been seduced, tricked, and conned into agreeing to join a reality television show in a remote mountain location accessible only by airplane, the mysterious disappearances and hideous murders begin.



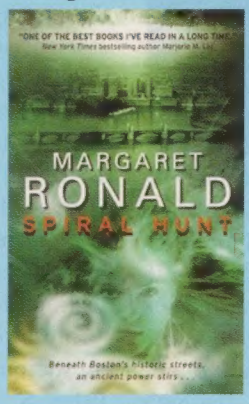
By contrast to a leisurely and enjoyable setup, the back half of the book felt somewhat rushed. Once the bodies start hitting the floor they drop like flies, and we barely have time to engage the mystery before it is solved and the inevitable climactic battle begins. I would have preferred a little more time for the themes and plot unpack itself, and to get to know the supporting cast, before the inevitable murder-mystery attrition set in. All in all, however, it's better to be too short than too long, and I recommend this highly for airports and beaches.

By contrast, Charlie Madigan, the protagonist of Kelly Gay's *The Better Part of Darkness* (Pocket, mass market paperback, 416 pp., $7.99, ISBN: 978-1-43910-965-6) is both mouthy *and* brittle, and I found it very hard to connect with her narrative when so many of her problems are self-created and she has so little awareness of that fact. This made me sad, because there's a lot about this book that made me want to like it—Gay's worldbuilding is clever, she manages to bring in a complex backstory and political plot and keep most of its balls in the air, and she uses a number of creatures (djinni, sirens) that are not as common around the urban fantasy water cooler as the ubiquitous vampires and werewolves. Madigan is a single mom and her relationship with her daughter is a strong and believable motivator.



But the book never comes together for me. For one thing, it adheres a little too closely to the Only a Rogue Cop Working Outside the System Can Accomplish Anything paradigm so popular in shoot 'em up movies of the seventies and eighties (Clint Eastwood, I am looking at you), and for another, I found the prose style jarring and awkward.

I found Margaret Ronald's *Spiral Hunt* (Eos Books, mass market paperback, 320 pp., $7.99, ISBN: 978-0-06166-241-6) refreshing for a number of reasons. It follows Evie Scelan, a "Hound"—someone with the supernatural ability to track any object by scent. Scelan really *can* track a falcon across a cloudy sky. It's a great engine for driving a plot, in that it makes Scelan herself the object of desire for many, and it also gives her a good deal of power.



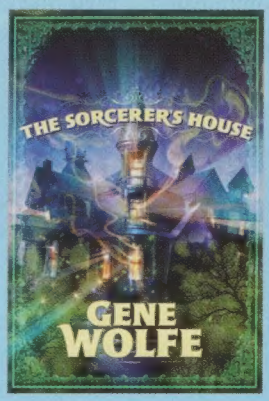
Scelan too has a complicated web of associations, including the obligatory magic shop owner and a couple of likely male leads. She suffers betrayals and false trails and a great deal of peril with wit and courage, which makes for an engaging narrative. One thing in particular that I found very attractive about this book is that Ronald concentrates entirely on Celtic mythology while building her world. For a book set in Boston, this makes a good deal of sense—obviously, the Fair Folk emigrated at the same time that Boston's other Irish arrived—and it also provides a pleasing sense of cohesiveness to the worldbuilding that is often missing in books that go for the one-from-column-A, one-from-column-B approach.

Additionally, *Spiral Hunt* offers a tremendous sense of place. Ronald lives in Boston, and it shows in the way she evokes the city her characters move through.

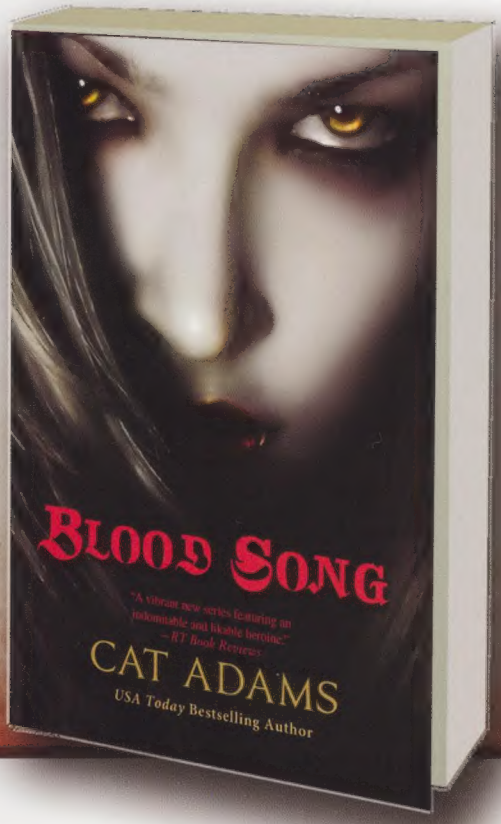
The final novel I wish to consider is Gene Wolfe's *The Sorcerer's House* (Tor Books, hardcover, 304 pp., $24.99, ISBN: 978-0-76532-458-0), a contemporary fantasy by a celebrated author. While more literary in its aspirations than the books reviewed above, I found this novel more transparent than most of Wolfe's work. Wolfe is an acknowledged modern master of the genre, but he has more often written in traditional fantasy settings—where by "traditional," I mean, of course, not traditional at all, once he's done with them.

The Sorcerer's House is an epistolary novel, a quick and charming read which reminded me by turns of Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* and John Crowley's *Little, Big*. It begins when our protagonist, Baxter Dunn, an ex-convict with a twin brother ("He's the good twin. I'm the evil twin."), inherits a Bellairsian house in the small town of Medicine Man, which is populated by a cast of characters that would not be out of place in a Lilian Jackson Braun novel.

And as in the Braun novel, our protagonist finds himself encountering a series of unlikely coincidences that lead him ever deeper into mystery—more mysterious inheritances, talking foxes, werewolf attacks, iterating twinships—but rather than feeling cozy and protective, these coincidences begin to acquire an ominous weight, accelerating toward inevitable (and horrific) conclusions. The book ends in as much mystery as it begins, which is of course a hallmark of Wolfe, but the careful reader is invited to read between the lines and supply her own narrative. I found this one very satisfying. ∞



Elizabeth Bear was a winner of the 2005 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, she won Hugos in 2008 and 2009. She is one of only five writers who have won multiple Hugo Awards for fiction after winning the John W. Campbell Award.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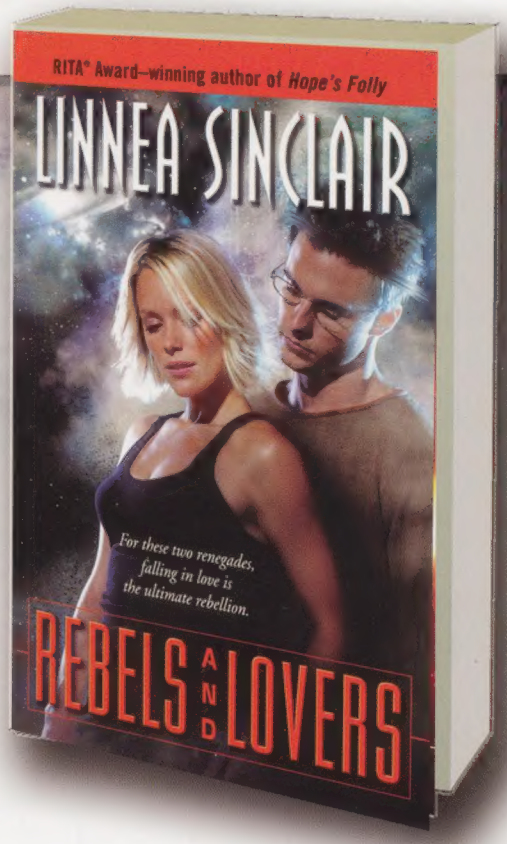
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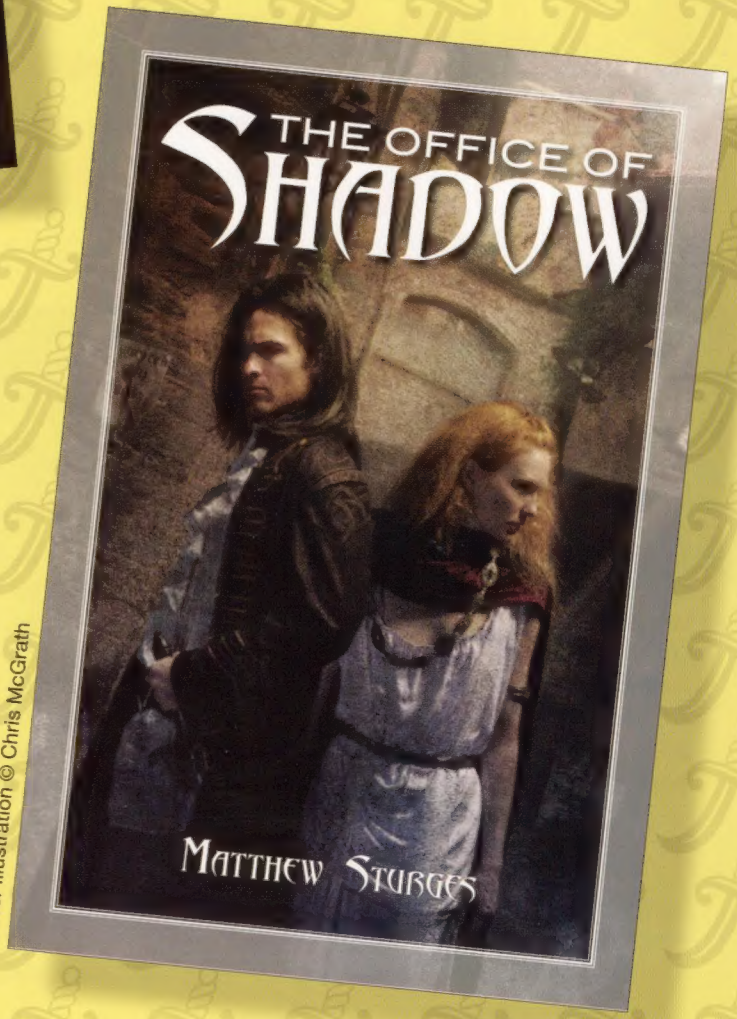

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